The Himālaya

A Cultural Pilgrimage

Dattatreya Balkrishna Kalelkar

Translated by Ashok Meghani

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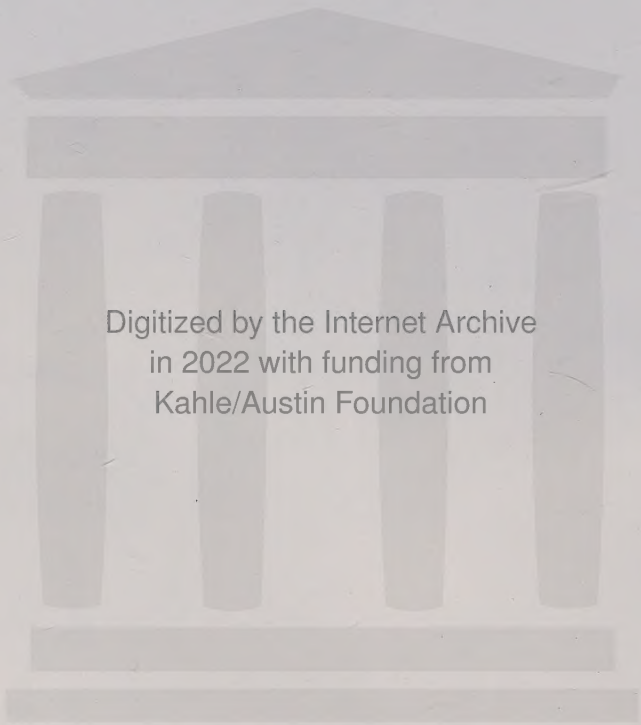
Considered a classic of Gujarati Literature, ***Himālayano Prawās*** is more than a mere chronicle of a Himalayan pilgrimage. The author has used it as a vehicle to roam the vast landscape of Indian history and culture. The physical journey described here happened in a two-month stretch in 1912. This chronicle was published in a series of articles starting in 1919 and continuing for several years. Published in the book form, it has seen six editions and continues to sell even today. It has been used as a textbook in many University curricula for students of Gujarati.

₹ 200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The Himālaya
A Cultural Pilgrimage

ગુજરાતી લિટરરી ઍકેડેમી ઓફ નોર્થ અમેરિકા

ઉત્તમ ગુજરાતી સાહિત્યના અનુવાદની યોજના હેઠળ
તૈયાર થયેલ કાકાસાહેબ કાલેલકરની અમર કૃતિ

'હિમાલયનો પ્રવાસ'નો

આ અનુવાદ સહર્ષ એના સભ્યોને ભેટ-પુસ્તક તરીકે આપે છે.

આ પુસ્તકની પસંદગી માટે
શ્રી ભોળાભાઈ પટેલ અને શ્રી નિરંજન ભગતના,
આ સુંદર અનુવાદ કરવા માટે શ્રી અશોક મેઘાણીના,
અને આ કાર્યમાં આપેલી આર્થિક મદદ બદલ અમે
શ્રી ઇલા અને ડૉ. તરુણ ધારીઆ,
શ્રી દેવશ્રી અને ડૉ. સંજીવ પરીખ,
ડૉ. કુસુમ અને ડૉ. જયેશ શાહ,
અને ઍકેડેમીનાં બીજાં થોડાં સભ્યોના ઋણી છીએ.

કાર્યવાહક સમિતિ વતી,
રામ ગઢવી

Kiran Doshi
Kirti Doshi
9 Harrowgate Drive
Cherry Hill, NJ 08003-1912

The sculpture reproduced on the endpaper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodhana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From : Nagarjunakonda, 2nd century A.D.

Courtesy : National Museum, New Delhi

THE HIMĀLAYA

A Cultural Pilgrimage

Original Gujarati by
Dattatreya Balkrishna Kalelkar

English Translation
Ashok Meghani

Sahitya Akademi

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To the angelic memories
of my beloved friend
Anantbuwa Mardhekar

History

This series of articles was originally written for a handwritten monthly publication at the Sābarmati Āshram, mainly to satisfy the wishes of my Āshram coworkers and students. There were three of us that went on the trip chronicled here: Swāmi Ānand, our dear friend Anantbuwa Mardhekar and I. It will be impossible for me to properly convey the joy and experience the three of us derived from this Himālayan trek.

* * *

The oppression that followed the Delhi Darbār – the extravagant celebration of the 1911 India visit by King George V immediately after his coronation – made it impossible for me to continue any further with my beloved Nationalist Education work. And that made me think of going on this pilgrimage. I left my Vadodarā home in early 1912, if I am not mistaken, on the auspicious day of Akhātrij, and set out for Prayāg (Allahābād). The pilgrimage that covers the three holy places of Prayāg, Kāshi and Gayā is known as Tristhali Yātrā. I wanted to complete it and be freed from my obligation to my late father's soul. Following that, I had planned to fulfil my longtime wish to visit Swāmi Vivekānanda's Belur Math and to pay my respects to Shri Mahendranāth Guptā, the author of Sri Rāmakrishna Kathāmrita. We were very fortunate in reaching there on the day of Vaisākhi Purnimā – the full moon day in the lunar

calendar month of Vaisākha – and were able to join the residents of the Math in the religious celebration of Buddha's birth anniversary. That same day we went to the town of Khardah to listen to Chaitanya Sankirtana – a chanting and singing of hymns. Sister Niveditā has written about the significance of this place.

My friend Anantbuwā, being a hereditary member of the Rāmdāsi Sect, had a great desire to visit Ayodhyā. We did that and then proceeded to Almorā to rendezvous with Swāmi Ānand. We spent the remainder of the month of Vaisākha there. From there, accompanied by Swāmi Ānand, we formally started our pilgrimage on foot from Haridwār, on the holy day of Gangāji's Dashaharā. The farther we went, the more ambitious we grew. Finally, we covered Jamanotri, Gangotri, Kedārnāth and Badrināth – four of the holiest [Hindu] shrines in all of North India – and returned to Almorā. That is the journey that this travelogue is all about.

Most people believe that travelling on foot is a very hard task. For me it is not the travel itself, but finding the time to write about it, that is the difficult task. The entire Himālaya trip described here took forty days to complete. I started writing about the trip in 1919, a whole seven years later. That is a long time for all of the memories to remain equally fresh in one's mind. And how interesting can it be to recount experiences that you don't clearly remember!

Due to a variety of circumstances, this series of articles took fifteen years to complete. Is it any wonder then if the writing lacks consistency? A careful reading would reveal big shifts in my attitude on life.

The hastily written last few chapters are short on descriptions. In addition to my recollections virtually being erased by the elapsed time, the latter part of the travel itself had been completed in a somewhat fatigued state. That fatigue substantially affected the description of that part of the travel. Readers had justifiable expectations from me, expectations that I had the responsibility to meet. If I have failed them in that regard, I hope they will find it in their hearts to forgive me.

In those fifteen years, the youth of Gujarat have undertaken much travel. It is my sincere hope that those youngsters, Gujarātis and other Indians alike, gain greater understanding of the importance of travel, roam to every corner of this great country of ours and observe our countrymen… and then enrich our literature by writing many travelogues dripping with patriotism.

To get up-close glimpses of our motherland and of her countless children, and then to verbalise those glimpses, is a form of worship. If this series of articles serves as one small offering of prayer, and lingers in the reader's memory even for a few days, it will mean much to me.

Dattatreya Balkrishna Kalelkar

Translator's Note

This work is an English translation of the original travelogue *Himālayano Prawās* by Kakasaheb Kalelkar, considered a classic of Gujarati literature.

I had several reservations in undertaking this translation project. The principal cause of concern was a comment I had heard, "Kākāsāheb's ornamental prose is impossible to translate." Although in similar awe of the author's colossal stature, I took this as a challenge and decided not to back down from it. A careful reading of the original raised some other questions in my mind but they were not sufficient reason for me not to proceed.

The original work consisted of about 195 printed pages. I figured I would need about six months to finish the project. It didn't take me long to realise how badly I had underestimated the complexity of this job. The word-ornaments took their expected toll, of course; but, what turned out to be really difficult came from the book's hidden content. The work is replete with historical, scriptural and literary references. Researching and understanding those references was crucial to preserving the author's intent. Numerous Sanskrit and Marathi citations required help from others to understand and translate them. The travel information in the book being sketchy at best (for a travelogue), I spent quite some time in figuring out the trekking route and putting a map together to show it. All in all, it took me fourfold the time and effort compared to my initial estimate. I must also mention that information available online, specifically on the Wikipedia website, has been of immense value in all my research.

About this translation :

- I have used the singular 'The Himālaya' instead of 'The Himālayas' for a reason. The Himālaya stands as a father figure, a sentinel, a guardian in the Indian psyche. Geographically, it may be a range made up of thousands of mountains. Culturally, 'The Himālaya' is a single entity, and hence my use of the singular.
- In spelling of all except the most commonly used names, I have used an 'ā' to indicate the 'ah' sound e.g. Himālaya, Gangā, Vivekānanda.
- As much as possible, I have tried to use the current and official spellings of place names e.g. Haridwār (not Hardwār), Belur Math (not Belud Math), Mumbai (not Bombay).
- I have incorporated some text from Swami Ānand's writings on the same journey, principally to supplement the author's narrative with what had lapsed from his memory.
- Against the expressed wishes of the author, I have included some excerpts from his article 'Yamunārāni' in the chapter 'Jamanotri.'
- I have added the text '[Hindu]' in certain statements to clarify them as specific to Hindu thought and beliefs.
- In a couple of instances, my translations of quoted Sanskrit verses are not literal. This is deliberate because I have tried to interpret the author's intent and put it in my words. Scholars would certainly scoff at my interpretation of Kālidāsa's famous déjà vu verse in chapter 30.
- I had inserted many footnotes to explain textual references, mainly intended for readers not familiar with India, its history and its culture. Realising that most of the book's readers would be familiar with the information, I later decided to move most of them into a chapter-wise glossary at the end of the book.

Gujarati Literary Academy of North America initiated this translation of *Himālayano Prawās* under its program to make literary masterpieces from Gujarati available in English. I thank its officers and members for entrusting this extremely demanding job to me.

I had to seek help in translating the Sanskrit and Marathi references in this book. I am thankful to Dr Vinod Joshi and Ashok Vidwans for their help. Early on in the project, I also sought advice from Dr Natwar Gandhi about my approach to this project. I thank him for taking time out of his extremely busy schedule and reviewing my work on the first few chapters of this translation.

I am grateful to Rohit Kothari and his staff at Sharda Mudranalaya, Ahmedabad, for their help in preparing the two maps in this book, and to David Serota for adding directional information to them.

I have been blessed with the affection of two stalwarts of Gujarati literature – Dr Sitanshu Yasashchandra and Dr Bholabhai Patel. But for Dr Patel's arm twisting, I would not have started on this project; and would still be floundering about halfway through if Dr Yasashchandra had not prodded me on. Both have shown their deep interest in this translation, have minutely read through much of it and provided extremely valuable guidance, suggestions and encouragement. I express my heartfelt gratitude to them for their kindness.

I have also been blessed with a family that has supported me through two years of this work. My wife Asha has endured through my phases of intense work, as also tried to nudge me out of my days of lazy brooding. My children Bela and Sagar, two extremely good writers themselves, have read through the entire text and provided invaluable comments, corrections, and their generation's perspective to me. I owe my gratitude to all three of them.

I must say I had some misgivings about the project after my initial reading of the original. Although the book is mostly about the author's travels in the Himālaya, I thought it came up short in its details about places, and the travel itself, to be called a 'travelogue'

in the geographical sense. I eventually realised that the book is about travel over a vast cultural landscape spanning time, space, and the Indian psyche. I stand humbled and corrected in this regard.

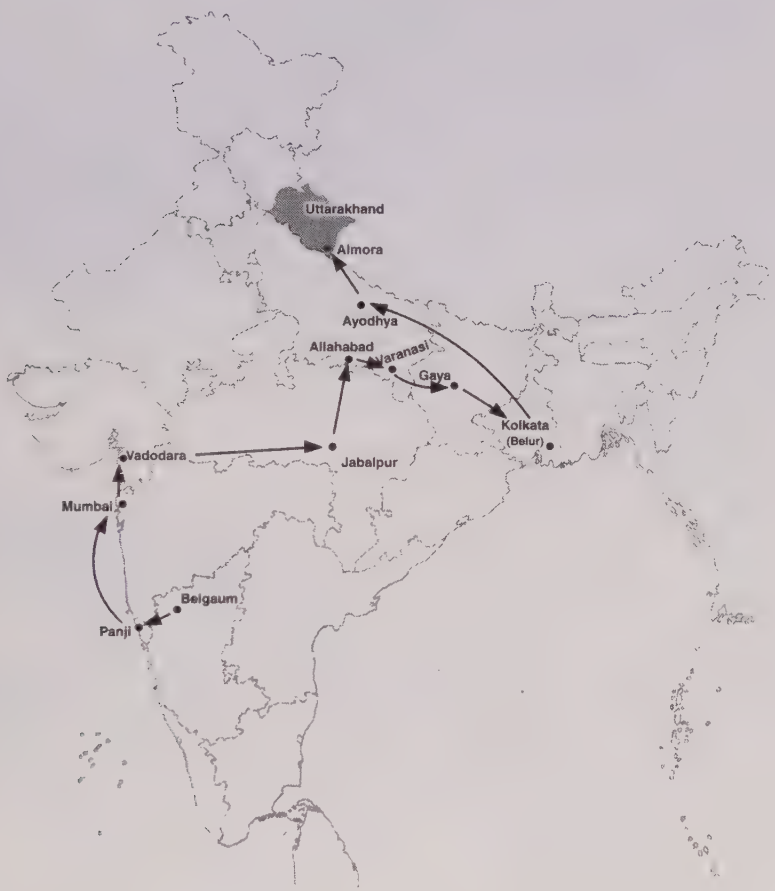
It is necessary to add a word about this translation. Acutely aware of the enormous task I was entrusted with, I have tried to give my all to this project. If the result falls short, it will only be because my 'all' was not sufficient for a task of this complexity. I will be immensely grateful for any feedback from the readers.

I would like to close with this. Not being very religious, going on a 'Chār Dhām' pilgrimage has not appealed to me. Kākāsāheb and Swāmi Ānand's narratives have, however, created this intense desire in me to experience the final walks to the Jamanotri and Gangotri shrines. Perhaps, with some cooperation from my aging knees, I may yet get my wish.

This translation is affectionately dedicated to Shri Bholabhai Patel who made such an effort to make this project happen, and is now not around to see it come to fruition. I will sorely miss him.

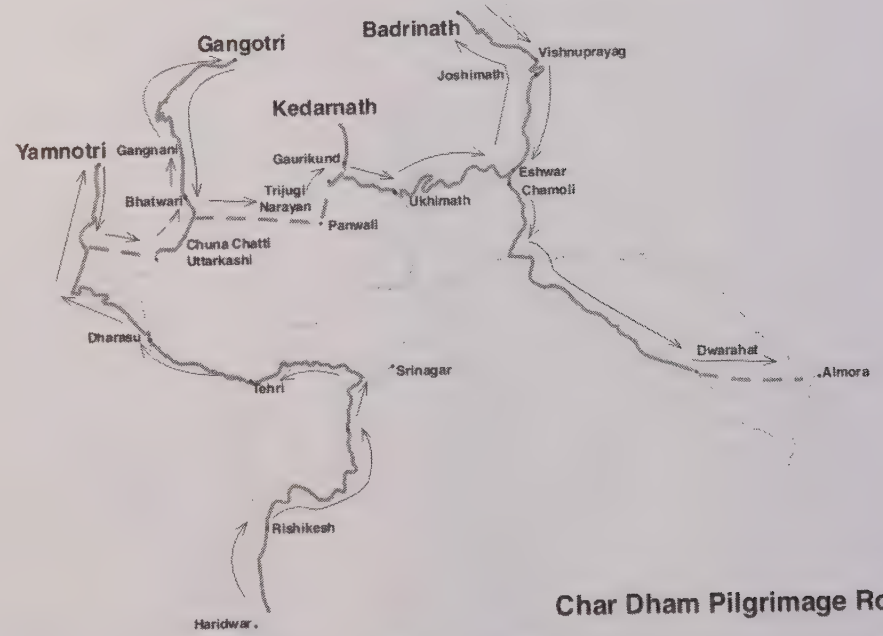
Ashok Meghani
Baldwin, Maryland, USA

Major Stops Made En Route to the Himālaya



Belgaum - Panji (Goa) - -Mumbai – Vadodarā – Jabalpur
Allahābād (Prayāg) – Vārānasi – Gayā– Kolkāta – Ayodhyā- Almorā

The Foot pilgrimage Route Followed



Char Dham Pilgrimage Route

Haridwar - Rishikesh – Devprayag – Tehri – Dharasu – Yamnotri – (Uprikot) – Uttarkashi - Bhatwari – Gangnani - Gangotri
Gangotri – Gangnani – Bhatwari – Panwali – Trijugi Narayan – Gaurikund – Kedarnath
Kedarnath – Gaurikund – Ukhimath – Chamoli – Joshimath – Badrinath - Joshimath – Chamoli - Dwarahat - Almora

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1

The Decision

My body moves forward...
But, my mind rebels and runs the opposite way.

The Himālaya! I have always had this intense desire to go there. The thought had always existed, but I just had no idea how or when it might come to fruition. In the end, my road to the Himālaya opened up in the most unexpected way.

I took my family to our home in Belgaum. From there, I set off under the pretense of going on a pilgrimage to Kāshi. I kept my real intentions to myself. Anantbuwā left with me.

We were physically moving at the speed of our train, but my imagination was flying ahead at the speed of the wind, no, at the speed of my mind, towards the Himālaya. Another part of me was thinking: I am leaving Mahārāshtra; perhaps I would never return; would I ever hear the sweet sounds of my beloved Marāthi tongue again? The Himālaya was pulling me one way. My lifelong attachment with Mahārāshtra was trying to hold me back. My heart leapt ahead, but my feet were weighed down with the pain of leaving.

I finally decided that we would not leave without spending at least eight to ten days in Goa's picturesque natural surroundings. We spent ten days there, and then left Goa with heavy hearts.

A coastal voyage brought us to Mumbai. I had no pressing reason to stay in Mumbai yet found it difficult to leave. Mumbai would be our last glimpse of Mahārāshtra. Until that day, I had not known how strong my bond with Mahārāshtra, and how deep my love for the Marāthi language, were. The strong feeling of being a Mahārāshtrian really awakened in me when I was about to leave Mumbai.

We arrived in Vadodarā. I went around visiting Ganganāth Vidyālaya[1] and my other old haunts with the same mixed feelings that one's soul would perhaps have when looking at the body it has just departed. After seeking the blessings of our learned elders, we set forth on our ambitious journey on Shivāji's birth anniversary.

1. Until it closed down in 1911, the author served as the principal of Ganganath Bhāratiya Sarva Vidyālaya, a nationalist school.

2

Prayāgrāj

It was the month of Vaisākh – and its merciless heat rained down on us. As our train traversed the vast middle part of the Indian plains, the air inside our coach felt hot enough to bake bread in. We drank water at every stop, but the dry heat pervaded our very souls. The only cool relief came from hearing Marāthi spoken at every station, and the bāwal trees we saw on both sides of the rail tracks, reminding us of the road to Pandharpur – the abode of Lord Vithobā. My mind found solace in the knowledge that as long as I heard Marāthi spoken and saw those bāwal trees, I was still in the bosom of my beloved Mahārāshtra. This feeling persisted as far as Jabalpur.

A friend of mine lived in Jabalpur. I looked him up, went to his house and had a meal there. I knew that it was going to be my last Mahārāshtrian meal for a while. But, weird as this might sound, circumstances forced me to have it incognito. Let me explain.

A few years earlier, this friend was preparing for his law exam and was to become an attorney. I had argued to him that practising law was a dirty line of work, and that he should consider joining the field of Nationalist education instead. I had succeeded in this treacherous attempt and incurred the wrath of his entire family. The family had never met me, but they knew my name very well

indeed. When my friend saw me, he immediately spoke to me in English, "Listen, if my mother finds out who you are, you are likely to get a reception you will never forget. You are here only for a half-hour, why not avoid all that unpleasantness?"

So I agreed. Quiet as a thief, I bathed and ate. Unable to associate my face with my real identity, his mother lovingly fed me a hot and delicious Mahārāshtrian meal. I bowed my head to her, and departed with her affectionate blessings.

Prayāgrāj was the first destination of our pilgrimage. Famous in history with much written about it in the Hindu scriptures, this is the place of the picturesque confluence of the rivers Gangā and Yamunā. From one side you see the descended-from-heaven Gangā sending fountains of white sand on both her banks. From the other side comes Yamunā, the sister of Lord Yama, flowing gracefully, projecting her dignified status and eminence. For quite a distance after their confluence, one can still distinguish the pristine white of the Gangā and the darker waters of the Yamunā flowing side by side. Since time immemorial, our poets have given full vent to their Saraswati-inspired imagination while describing the living poetry of this setting. Our devout [Hindu] populace has, for ages now, embraced this tri-river confluence with an uncommon enthusiasm. Any mention of the Gangā immediately brings to mind Haridwār and Kurukshetra. The name Yamunā at times conjures up images of Lord Krishna's youthful haunts of Mathurā and Vrindāvan; at other times it reminds one of Mughal Emperor Shāhjahān's Delhi and Agra. Akbar the Great, the one who envisioned unity between Hindu and Muslim cultures, built a strong fortification around the 'eternal' banyan tree which still stands here.

We visited the fort, now occupied by a contingent of British soldiers. The pilgrims had to wait outside the gate facing the confluence of rivers. When a good-sized gathering had assembled, a native guard escorted the group inside. They got to view *Akshayavat*, the eternal banyan tree, and exited through the gate on the opposite side. The so-called tree turned out to be nothing but a

huge trunk. The believers say that the trunk is here, the branches are in Bodhigayā, Bihar.

It is difficult to understand the significance of such beliefs. Is it an indication that Buddhism had spread from Bodhigayā in Bihar to as far west as Allāhābād at one time? In the Himalayā too, some people would have you believe that the great *shivaling* (the phallus-shaped idol of Lord Shiva), you see in Kedārnāth is only one end of it. The other end shows up in the Pashupatināth shrine in Kāthmāndu, Nepal. Isn't this absurd? Well, some Hindus go to the ridiculous extent of claiming that one foot of Lord Vishnu is in Gayā, the other in, of all the places, Mecca! But, where the imagination reigns supreme, who is going to rein it in?

In any case, the underground vault, where the immune-from-decay banyan tree is located, is a vast chamber that also houses countless idols of gods. At one time, the flow of the rivers Gangā and Yamunā practically touched the banyan tree. Many Hindus used to end their lives by jumping off the tree into the holy rivers. They believed that suicide committed there was not only not sin, it actually led to moksha – eternal liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth. As if disgusted with such inhuman self-sacrifices, the confluence moved away from that location. Adding insult to injury, the Mughal emperor Akbar built a fort around the banyan tree and put a permanent stop to the suicidal jumps off of the tree. The fortification, of course, served a strategic military purpose as well.

Within the fort also stands an Ashoka Pillar, a polished sandstone pillar erected by the Buddhist Emperor Ashoka back in 232 BC. The 36-foot tall pillar carries inscriptions of edicts from Ashoka. It also has inscriptions praising the victories of Samudragupta and written by his court poet Harishena. Both inscriptions are considered to be of extreme historical value.

I sweet-talked and cajoled the guard into permitting me to take a closer look at that pillar. This Punjabi guard tried to convince me there was nothing to see there, that the idols to view and worship

were all down in the underground vault. How could the poor man possibly know what I was really dying to see? When would people like him really have a chance to understand that the cylindrical pillar carried timeless messages from two millennia ago? Will that have to wait until such time when education is compulsory and universally available in India? Until the joy of nationalism reaches every home? Or until some folklorist decides to sing songs of praise in the local tongue!

Right under the watchful eye of the fort stretches the vast sandy expanse of the beach at the holy confluence site. A multitude of tents occupied by Prayāg's famous pandās (Brahmin priests) awaits the pilgrims there. There are so many tents, and they are so densely packed together, that all of them have pennants flying on them, with unique markings from which the pilgrims can locate their family's pandā. The pennant markings are generally religious symbols and characters, but modern day symbols like 'the flying carriage' (the automobile) and the steam locomotive also have begun to show up

The well-known Hindu religious festival of Kumbha Melā happens here every 12 years. A smaller Māgh Melā is scheduled once a year. These festivals are attended by monks, ascetics and Hindu holy men and women from every part of India. Theology is discussed, philosophies are argued over, debates on every religious aspect rage during this weeks-long festival. Hinduism stresses the need of a guru, a mentor, for true learning. This is where the students anxiously seek truly knowledgeable gurus, and the student-hungry gurus gain disciples.

The discussions on what constitutes acceptable pramāna (proof) for debates last for hours. Some believe only in Pratyaksha (perception) and Anumāna (inference). Most would accept Upamāna (resemblance, similarity) and Shabda (word, either Vedic – word-of-God or Laukik – word of other trustworthy humans).

When the Nāgā Bāwās debate, they mostly employ two modes of proof absent in the Nyāya Shāstra of Hindu philosophy – their

clubs and abusive language. These Nāgās have no fear of death, yet are deathly afraid of the police. This is because if they are arrested and put in a police lockup, they cannot observe their customary religious practices. If sticks fly and a few of their brethren perish, the Nāgās would bury the bodies in the sand, rake the sand even and sit on top of the burial spot – all before the police arrive. A thousand of them will be standing around; not one of them will rat to the police. We know that even the severest penalties have not produced any noticeable reduction in criminal activity in our society in general. It is also worth noting that the Bāwās' escape from legal penalties has not produced any increase in their crimes.

One of my objectives in Prayāgrāj was to sprinkle my father's ashes into the waters at the tri-river confluence. After that was done, I performed the shrāddha rite for him.

Seeing a lot of mustache-less faces on the riverbank, it almost seemed as though South Indians had invaded the North in a big way. My normal impression of the Sindhis was of someone part-British and part-Pārsee [fair-skinned]. But, in this holy spot, Sindhis would take first place among the pilgrims, with their visible religious fervour and sentimental devotion. The Mahārāshtrians are consciously concerned about securing the most spiritual benefit from their pilgrimage in the shortest amount of time and at the least possible expense. Gujarātis, at all times, seem to be searching for better food. The Bengālis are anxious to make sure the world takes notice of their overflowing devotion. The Madrāsis look intelligent but, seemingly out of place owing to their alien attire and mannerisms, appear to wander around aimlessly. Unable to speak Hindi, they have great difficulty dealing with porters and horse-cart drivers.

But, Prayāg is native territory to the residents of the United Provinces. Clad in their cotton tunics and their caps worn slightly crooked, these men walk around like lazy bulls, their mouths constantly chewing betel leaves. Gainful work must hold no meaning for one that is so deeply satisfied with oneself! And then there is the English educated one; no matter which part of the country he

comes from, he stands away from the crowd. Wearing the resentful expression of someone who, with his education, should not be on this pilgrimage, he suffers this disgrace all by his lonesome.

Oblivious to strange multitudes of such dispositions, attires and customs on their shores, the ageless waters of the Gangā and the Yamunā continue on their incessant journey towards the immortal city of Vārānasi.

3

Vārānasi, The Eternal City

I had visited Vārānasi[2] once, but that familiarity had not generated any contempt in me. As the train crossed over the sacred Gangā, the otherworldly view of Kāshi from the bridge left me speechless and brought tears to my eyes.

One can hear a loud buzzing sound – such as would emanate from a busy beehive – long before arriving in Kāshi. In the stretch

2. Vārānasi : Also known as Kāshi or Banāras; one of the oldest continuously inhabited (since ca.1200-1000 BC) cities in the world.

of the west bank of the Gangā between its tributaries, Varuna and Asi, the sight that immediately grabs one's attention is that of the twin sky-reaching minarets of the mosque built by Emperor Aurangzeb. The sight touched off a chain of thoughts in me. I thought to myself : Behind these two minarets lies one of Indian history's most unexplored facts. Emperor Aurangzeb, a passionately zealous Muslim, realised that the Vishwanāth Temple here was the focal point of Kāshi and among the holiest of Hindu shrines. He ordered its demolition [in 1669] and had a mosque built at the site. Relics from the old temple can still be found in the rear of the mosque grounds. Aurangzeb died, and eventually the Mughal Empire fell. Delhi was taken over by the Marathās whose dream was to establish a Hindu Empire. The Marathā chieftains started donating land to the Pandās of Haridwār. The thought of demolishing the Aurangzeb Mosque with its Islamic flag flying atop, and removing that blot on the holiest Hindu city, did not even occur to those Hindu rulers. Because of that, the still flying Islamic flag on that mosque is no longer a symbol of the once victorious Muslim rulers. It has become a pennant for the tolerance and respect demonstrated by the Hindus, even when they held sway over all of India. The British do not have a clue about this Hindu belief in the power of love. No wonder they refuse to accept it! That must be the reason why the Government wants to preserve the vindictive plaque at the infamous well in Kanpur,[3] and has British soldiers guarding it; also the reason why they took such immense pride in erecting the statue of a general brandishing his sword, in the very heart of Delhi.

The flood of these thoughts would have swept me away, but the Gangā's serene flow under the bridge quieted me down. But, that quiet was very short-lived. As we approached the train station, my heart sank, my knees turned weak at the thought of the hordes of pandās that were about to descend on me. The fear in me was worse than that experienced by a traveller in the Russian forests

3. Kānpur well: During the 1857 'mutiny', the rebellious soldiers are rumored to have slaughtered some British soldiers and dumped them in this well.

when chased by a pack of wolves. Shaking with fear, I got off the train, ran to a horse-cart driver and said, 'I don't care, what you charge me but please take me away from here.' We immediately took off, only to see a couple of Pandās with books [of family records] under their arms run after us. I barely escaped from their clutches, and arrived at the residence of Anantbhat.

Anantbhat turned out to be a gentleman through and through. He followed all the proper practices, and performed all the rites required of a devout Hindu. As befitted a professional priest, he took good care of all his religious customers, and earned a reasonably good income from them. I knew he must be earning enough because he was also a money-lender on the side.

As I lay in my bed that night, I thought about the pandās. It occurred to me that, in a way, Anantbhat was just another version of a pandā. If he were not there, my Kāshi pilgrimage would not go smoothly. In Europe, all big cities have hotels; they also have house-rental agents. Europe has companies like Thomas Cook to help you with your travels, and has shipping agents in every port. Don't these pandās perform comparable services suitable for our way of life? Write to a pandā ahead of time, and he will meet you at the train station when you arrive. He will provide board and lodging to you. He will show you the sights of Kāshi; he will take you to the various temples and explain the importance of each; he will accompany you to the market. And what does he charge you for all that? Whatever it is you choose to pay. You are unlikely to find such simple and inexpensive service anywhere else.

So why do we feel so aggravated by the mere thought of these pandās? The simple answer is, because the pandās do not realize that they have forgotten their primary function of providing priestly services; they have become house-agents and hoteliers instead. Unable to find the proper balance between the two separate objectives, they have fallen into this undesirable state. The pandas' intended role was to guide, to teach the pilgrims. In the very early days, out of kindness and in accordance with their perceived duty towards guests, some pandās must have started providing accommodations

and conveniences to their patrons. Then, the obvious wealth of some of those patrons must have corrupted the pandas' hearts into their current greedy states.

Some Brahmins claim that the greed of the pandās' is the result of an ancient curse. How ingenious of these Brahmins to invent a scriptural basis for the worst of their faults! Seriously, if some of these descendants of Gangā adapt themselves and become full-time house rental agents and professional tourist guides, they can regain their lost prestige, and still earn a very good living. The satisfied pilgrims' gratitude would be an added bonus for them!

The following morning we bathed at the famous Manikarnikā Ghāt. We scooped up water from the Gangā in both hands, raised it and ceremoniously poured it back, in our invocation to Mother Gangā.

A short walk brought us to the Chakrapushkarini Teerth. A priest was standing by and invited us, 'Aaiye, snaan keejiye!' Come, take a dip! When I turned that invitation down, my friend Anantbuwā was shocked. He asked, 'Why not? Is this not one of the holiest of places?' I replied, 'Of course it is. One dip in its holy waters, and you no longer have to worry about going to hell!' Buwā caught my drift, but we went closer to the Teerth to satisfy his curiosity. It was essentially a small sunken pool of water. A marble plaque bearing an English inscription with Queen Victoria's name and some other information stood at the top.

And the Teerth itself? It was a 25-30 feet long and 5 feet wide pit of stagnant water. The thousands of faithfuls that took the holy 'dip' in it every day had left a thick layer of sweat on it, making it impossible to tell what color the water was. That layer certainly wasn't enough to discourage the hundreds more we saw immersing themselves in the pool in the hope of avoiding hell after death. The Lord, I thought, must feel embarrassed and absolve them from such a penalty – embarrassed, because how was He going to provide a more disgusting pool of water even in hell?

Arriving at the [Manikarnikā] cremation ghāt. I saw the huge stacks of split wood for pyres there, and a morbid thought occurred to

me: could some of these be for me? It is believed that Vishweshwar, the Lord of the Universe, Himself comes and recites invocations in the ears of a person that dies here in Kāshi; the Lord also smothers His body with ashes from that person's pyre.

From there, we went to the Bindu Mādhava temple and paid our respects. We visited the long running Shinde Holkar free food center, and fondly remembered the righteous Queen Ahalyābāi. I saw visions of the foot-couriers she arranged for daily carriage of the holy Gangā-water from here all the way to Rāmeshwar at the southern tip of the Indian peninsula.

We went and made our obeisance at the Vishwanāth temple. The crush of the devotees, the muddy grounds, even the smell of the rotting bilipatra leaves only added to the poetry of the atmosphere and the devotion I felt. In this abode of the Lord of the Universe, there is no discrimination. All are equal in His eyes. All can enter here to pay their respects, at any time of day. There is no 'Do Not Enter If' ... sign to be seen here.[4]

There is a hole drilled at an angle in the inner sanctum's wall. From the inside, I could not understand the reason for it. But during my ritual circumambulation of the temple, I figured out that the hole was there for foreign visitors to get a view of the Vishwanāth idol without going inside. I saw a Thomas Cook tour guide giving his narrative spiel to some white-skinned women at the site of that view-hole.

I was told that the solid gold sheath on the dome and the spire of the temple bore witness to the great devotion of Ranjit Singh, the Lion of Punjab. The Aurangzeb-erected mosque stands nearby. Between the two shrines lies Jnana Vapi [literally, the Well of Wisdom]. The legend goes that when the Muslims came to demolish the temple, the Vishweshwara idol – acknowledging the strength of Kali Yuga, the age of immorality – jumped into this well, which is believed to reach all the way down to Pātāl, the netherworld!

4 Translator's note: This may not hold today. Some travel websites warn that only the Hindus are permitted inside the temple.

We went on to see the monastery where Sant Eknāth had completed his voluminous Eknāth Bhāgavat [in 1573]. The fact that the famed richness and purity of Sanskrit also exists in my Marāthi language was proven at this location. When that realisation hit me, I was overcome with emotion. I prostrated myself at this shrine and paid reverent respect to Eknāth Swāmi.

Our next stop was to see Trilingswāmi's statue. Trilingswāmi was an extremely famous holy man from the South. He oversaw the restoration of many of Kāshi's old temples and buildings, but refused to build a single new temple. His reasoning seems obvious. If you count all the major and minor temples and the idols of deities therein, the total would closely rival the human population of Kāshi. Why add more temples to that number?

India has had countless different empires in its history, has seen hundreds of royal capitals built. Some of those capital cities are mere memories today, and some others survive only as small unimportant villages. But this city, the abode of gods, a witness to the rise and fall of several empires and kingdoms, has herself survived more or less intact. The past can be seen very much alive in this divine city. The Gangā keeps breaking down the ghāts that she probably sees as barricades to her freedom. But, just as a baby calf keeps running back to its mother cow to feed at its udders even after being kicked by her, people keep building new ghāts to replace the old ones demolished by the mother.

In today's Vārānasi, the believers in Purva-Mimānsā continue to perform their Vedic rituals; their counterparts, the Vedāntis, the believers in Vedānta,[5] continue the long running Dwaita-Adwaita feud and provide their audiences with almost violent entertainment; the Vaiyākarnis go on their grammatical rampage and literally maul every word apart; you can witness the Bengāli and South Indian

5 Vedānta : The second part of the Vedas, broadly broken up into two schools of philosophy – Dwaita ("two" or Dualism) and Adwaita ("not two" or Monism) in their concepts of Ātman (Self) viz-a-viz Brāhman (the Infinite).

Nyāya experts' struggle to define the meanings contained in the tome *Gādādhari*; Christians and Āryasamājis[6] wage their war of words; some purists proclaim the rule of Dashagrantha – the Ten Tomes, including the four Vedas and six books of Vedānga.

The artisans of Vārānasi use their chisels to turn chunks of rocks into deities. And, some Brahmins eat their way into a lazy existence, turning themselves into barely alive chunks of rocks.

This is the city where Brahmins and untouchables teamed up to help the truth-devoted King Harishchandra free himself from his obligation to the Sage Vishwāmitra. This is where Tulsidās sang his Rām-Kathā (the story of Lord Rāma). This was also where the saint-poet Kabir wove the diverse Hindu and Muslim cultures together into one weave.

Some call Banāras 'the city of the dead and the dying'. But, as I mentioned earlier, time has swallowed up many of the great Indian cities and turned them into mere memories. Only Vārānasi lives on as the 'Eternal City,' because it remains the abode of the 'ageless faith.'

One day during our stay in Kāshi, we took a rowboat trip from the Dashāshvamedh Ghāt to the bridge and back. A mild breeze cooled and blessed by the holy Mother Gangā was blowing. All varieties of temples beckoned our attention, 'Look at me,' 'Here I am.' I bowed my head to every one of them with reverence. Just like the irregular facets of a piece of quartz, the irregularly arranged houses of Kāshi presented a very attractive spectacle. From dusk to dawn, an untold number of men and women, children and older folk can be seen playing on the river's bank as if carried on their mother's waist.

A paramahans – the holiest kind of ascetic – once lived on the Dashāshvamedh Ghāt. He wore no clothes. The first time I was in Banāras, I had tried to photograph him and had failed. I kept going around him to face him, and he kept turning his back on me.

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6 Āryasamāj: An organisation seeking to rid Hinduism of fictitious beliefs and rituals, and reverting back to the basic teachings of the Vedas.

That had saddened me at the time. As I thought about it later, it dawned on me that my attempt to take a picture of such a holy man's nudity was nothing short of barbaric. This time, I went to pay my respects to him but did not find him at the Ghāt. Then I learned that a recent flood in the river had carried him away. Some people had tried to pull him out of the water. He had firmly refused to come out, and chosen to go to his final rest in the holy bosom of Mother Gangā.

Kāshi is home to numerous religions and sects. Likewise, it also hosts many schools of architecture and sculpture. The next day, we set out to see samples of those arts. At the conclusion of the tour in the evening, we arrived at the Central Hindu College run by the Theosophists. There we saw a small temple of Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge and arts. At the Theosophical Lodge nearby, we heard Mrs. [Annie] Besant[7] speak. The subject was what kind of evolution the human animal will undergo in future. At the conclusion of the talk, we went to the Rāmakrishna Sevāshram. *Brahmachāri*[8] Chandrashekhar – an acolyte – greeted us and showed us around. We saw many acolytes learning Sanskrit there. Some ailing were being treated at a nearby clinic. I was impressed at how well-organized the Sevāshram was.

Then two or three Bengalis arrived from the city carrying musical instruments. Accompanied by the tānpurā (a four-stringed drone instrument) and tablā (a pair of drums), they sang a hymn written by the saint-poet Rāmprasād. The singing voices were of such exquisite quality that their notes echoed in my ears even after we had returned to our temporary residence.

On our last day in Kāshi, we went to the Kāla Bhairav Temple. We tied black silken threads on our wrists and around our necks. Inside the temple, I asked permission to depart the city from this 'Guardian of Kāshi' deity by reciting:

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7 Annie Besant: (1847-1933) English Theosophist, educational reformist, advocate of home rule in India.

8 Brahmachāri: Acolyte (literally, celibate from birth)

Sharp-teethed, humongous of body,
Fiery as the all-life-ending inferno,
O Bhairav, we bow our heads to you, and seek your leave.

From there, we started for Gayā, the final stop in our 'three-shrine' pilgrimage. I had been told that Gayā's pandās were notorious for their greedy harassment of the pilgrims. To nip that in the bud, I had already paid Anantbhat in advance for all the expenses and fees for the rituals I would want in Gayā, and secured a written receipt for it. This arrangement is no different from paying Thomas Cook for an entire trip in advance and getting a coupon book from them.

I am of the firm belief that each Hindu must visit Kāshi at least once in his or her life.

4

The Legend of Gayā

Brahmā, the god of creation, was in a foul mood when he created the asuras – the demons. He created devas – the gods – when he was in a far more benevolent state of mind.

Among the asuras, there was one especially mighty and accomplished warrior named Gayāsur. He was humongous in size. When one thinks of an asura, the stereotypical image that comes to mind is of an extremely cruel heartless being, a terroriser-of-gods, a kidnapper-of-nymphs, and an evil, malicious schemer with ominous powers. But, all asuras are not so evil. Bali, a king of the asuras, was known for his extremely charitable nature. Our Gayāsur was an asura of that benevolent variety. In a moment, we will see how the supposedly virtuous devas looked in comparison to this asura.

Gayāsur developed an obsession for attaining holiness, and proceeded to engage in extreme tapasyā[9]. He held his breath and continued holding it for thousands of years. As had happened before, the devas felt threatened by what the consequence of this tapasyā might be. As was their custom, the devas approached Brahmā for help. Brahmā went to Lord Shiva, who in turn went to Lord Vishnu.

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9 Tapasyā: a focused effort at austerity and an excruciatingly harsh penance in restraining physical urges, and in actively pursuing a higher purpose in life. The expected result is the grant of a boon from a deity.

Following the timeless ritual, the group offered prayers to Vishnu and sought his help.

Vishnu, the Supreme Lord of Preservation, asked them the reason for their anxiety.

"Please protect us from the threat this Gayāsur poses," was the collective cry.

"Why don't you go and visit him? I will be along momentarily to offer him a boon to end his tapasyā." Vishnu promised.

The devas asked Gayāsur to name the boon he desired. Gayāsur said, "It is my desire to become holier than all gods, brahmins, yajna (the pyre of offering), any shrine, any Rishi, the enlightened, the meditators – more virtuous than anyone or anything." The pleasantly surprised devas were more than agreeable to oblige him. Vishnu said, "Let it be so." Breathing a collective sigh of relief, everyone went home happy.

It did not take them long to realise that in averting one disaster, they had opened the door to another. People started lining up to pay their respects to the holy demon Gayāsur. His mere touch was sufficient to absolve them of their sins and to send them directly to Vaikunth – the heavenly abode. All worlds started emptying out. Yamapuri[10], the place where the souls of the dead were normally processed, was thus completely bypassed and deserted.

Yama – the god of death, and Indra – the king of gods, along with other officiating gods went back to Brahmā and complained, 'Here, take our resignations. The responsibilities you gave us have no meaning anymore. We have nothing to do.'

The entire contingent again ended up with Vishnu, the court of last resort. Vishnu had granted Gayāsur his wish and could not take it back. So, He devised a scheme and suggested it to the devas: "Go and ask Gayāsur to donate his holy body for a sacred yajna. Light the holy pyre right on his body."

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10 Yamapuri: the place where Yama, the god of death, brings the souls of the dead and decrees whether each goes to heaven or to hell.

Brahmā, with the devas in tow, went to see Gayāsur. Gayāsur welcomed them and, before they could even state their purpose, promised to do whatever they desired. Brahmā said, "I have travelled the worlds and been to all the holy shrines. I am searching for a place to perform a yajna. I have not found a place that is holier than your body. Will you offer your body for that?"

Gayāsur was ecstatic with joy. He told Brahmā, "My ancestors and descendants are truly blessed. You created this body and you made it virtuous. Surely, the yajna you have planned is meant for the benefit of all."

Inspired by such pure and unselfish emotions, Gayāsur wasted no time in offering his body for the yajna and laid down. For Brahmā, the creator of the Universe, it took but a snap to produce the yajna paraphernalia and an enormous array of Rishis to officiate at the rite. A huge pyre was lit on Gayāsur's body and the full yajna ceremony was performed. At its conclusion, the traditional donations – dakshinā – were given to the Brahmins. Gayāsur was presumed dead and they got ready to drop his body in a big lake.

And then they noticed that the demon's body was still moving. Goodness gracious, what were they going to do now? An enormously surprised Brahmā yelled at Yama, "Go, fetch that big *dharmashilā*[11] from your house and put it on top of this demon. That is an order! This is no time to argue right and wrong." (That order was given to Yama, the god of *Nyāya* – justice!)

Even the big, heavy slab of rock placed on the demon was not enough to stop him from stirring. Then, all the gods tried to quiet him down by stomping on top of him – to no avail. A desperately worried Brahmā now made tracks for Ksheerasāgar – the ocean of milk – where Vishnu was at repose. A doorkeeper escorted Brahmā in, and Vishnu asked him the purpose of his visit.

Brahmā told him, "We performed the yajna on Gayāsur as you recommended, weighed him down with the sacred dharmashilā,

11 Dharmashilā: See the full story later in this chapter.

Rudra and the other devas sat on him. Yet, he refuses to be immobile. Now you are the only one that can help us. Please have mercy and do something."

From his body, Vishnu produced a stone idol of himself and gave it to Brahmā. But, when even that weight failed to hold the demon down, Vishnu himself arrived at the scene and carrying his famous gadā (mace) stood on the stone slab. He was joined by all major and minor gods and goddesses. With that, Gayāsur finally stopped moving.

Having given his all – including his own body – for the benefit of all, such outright deception broke Gayāsur's heart. With intense pain in his voice, he addressed the devas. "Did you have to deceive me like this? I provided my sinless body to Brahmā for the performance of his yajna. Did you not know that a word from Lord Vishnu would have been enough to permanently immobilize me? Did you and the Lord have to pound me with your maces like that? Anyway, whatever your intent, I wish you all eternal happiness."

The scriptures do not mention whether the gods felt any remorse for their disgraceful behavior, but they told Gayāsur, "We are very pleased with you. Tell us your wish."

Gayāsur asked, "For as long as this earth, this mountain, the sun, the moon and the stars exist, I want the supreme trinity of Brahmā-Vishnu-Shiva along with the other gods, all holy shrines of the three worlds, the holy Gangā and other rivers – all of those to reside on this rock slab above me. I want them to look after the welfare of all the beings on my behalf. All the pilgrims that come, bathe and make their offerings here... may they and their thousand generations of ancestors be absolved of all their sins. I ask that not one of the gods ever move from here. Please do not renege on this pledge."

The gods unanimously said, "So it shall be." The demon was satisfied and settled into eternal immobility.

At the conclusion of that episode, Brahmā donated all the land there and five villages to each Brahmin present. With the other gods as his witness, he gave the Brahmins furnished houses, Kāmadhenu – the miraculous cow of plenty, Kalpavriksha – the wish-fulfilling tree, an ornamental pārijāta tree; he gave them inexhaustible supplies of all kinds of foods and fruits. Then he told the Brahmins, "You have everything you want. From now on, you do not ask anyone for anything." Bowing his head to the Gadādhar Vishnu shrine, Brahmā returned to his abode in heaven.

But, the brahmins couldn't help themselves. They started accepting money for providing yajna services. When the smoke from those yajnas reached all the way up to heaven, Brahmā came down and took everything away from the brahmins.

"Your greed will always remain with you," he laid his curse on them. The brahmins cried and begged him to do something about their livelihood.

Brahmā took pity on them, "From here on, you will beg for everything. You will remain the providers of all this shrine's priestly services forever. Only through you will the pilgrims' offerings reach me."

Gaya's pandās of today are the descendants of those greedy brahmins of yore.

And the dharmashilā that Brahmā remembered in the nick of time? Here is the story behind it.

A virtuous sādhu had a daughter named Dharmavratā. She had all the good attributes desirable in a young girl. She was married to Brahmā's highly enlightened ascetic son Mareechi. In his advanced age, Mareechi returned home one day, tired after gathering fruit in the woods. Dharmavratā started rubbing ghee – clarified butter – on her husband's aching feet. His tiredness relieved by the soothing massage, the ascetic soon dozed off.

Dharmavratā was still massaging her sleeping husband's feet when Brahmā entered the house. The pious woman rose to greet her father-in-law. She gave him water to rinse his feet, properly worshipped him and made a comfortable bed for him.

Meanwhile Mareechi woke up from his nap. Angered to notice that his wife was not nearby, he invoked a curse on her, "You abandoned the job of massaging my feet without my permission! For that, turn yourself into a shilā – a slab of stone."

The innocent woman obviously felt wronged. She said, "When your revered father walks into our house, it is your duty as his son to take care of him. Am I to blame for doing that as your wife?" The sage realised the mistake he had made. The couple prayed to Lord Vishnu and sought his help. Brahmā also awoke from his sleep. Everyone praised Dharmavratā's virtuous dedication to her husband, and then told her, "No one has the power to nullify your husband's curse. Ask for any other boon that does not violate the sanctity of righteousness."

The pious woman said, "If you cannot right the wrong, I want this. Let the rivers, lakes, holy shrines, sages, the principal gods and the yajna-sites reside in me. Let me, this shilā, become the stone that can purify the universe, one look at it should free people from all their sins. Let this shilā last as long as the Universe lasts."

The gods granted her what she asked for, but soon wished they had not. Multitudes touched the shilā and went to vaikuntha directly. Yama, responsible for processing a person's soul after death and deciding its reward or punishment, was annoyed to say the least. He went to Brahmā and offered his yamadanda – the ceremonial staff of the god of death – and his resignation, "I don't have anything to do anymore."

Brahmā had a solution: "Take that shilā and put it away someplace safe in your house. Problem solved!" Soon, Yama was back on his old job and Dharmashilā became only a glorious memory.

When Gayāsur refused to stop moving even after the yajna was performed on his body, this was the shilā that Brahmā asked Yama

to fetch. Brahmā knew that the presence of all the teerthas (holy sites) in it had made the shilā tremendously heavy and extremely holy.

There is another legend associated with the gadā (mace) carried by Lord Vishnu when he stood atop Gayāsur's body. Gada was a demon with a body so strong and dense that even the king of gods Indra's famed vajra would not penetrate. Brahmā requisitioned this demon Gada's bones and had the artisan god Vishwakarmā fashion a gadā (mace) out of them. Brahmā then gave that gadā to Vishnu to slay another powerful demon named Heti. The curious thing is, Brahmā himself had granted a boon to this demon Heti that had made him immune to all the weapons that the gods possessed at the time!

To protect the people and for the freedom of the world, the idols of that Ādigadādhar[12] Vishnu and his consort Lakshmi still stand watch on the city that is replete with such sanctified memories. A pilgrim who travels to Gayā is said to get all his or her desires fulfilled. The scriptures warn that these pilgrims must be celibate and in control of their desires; they must remain pure [of thought and deed] and be content; they must not accept any alms or charity; they must remain free of ego; they must conquer their sensual desires; and they must be charitable. Only those that do so reap the benefits of this pilgrimage.

Sage Mareechi, who laid his curse on Dharmavratā, was himself punished by Lord Shiva with the curse, "You shall pay for this," which turned him dark of skin. But, when Shiva was convinced of Mareechi's remorse, he counter-acted his own curse with "You

12 Ādigadādhar: The mace-carrying Lord Vishnu.

shall find salvation in Gayā." Mareechi sat near the shilā that his wife had turned into, and started the most extreme tapasyā. One can imagine how many husbands deserve to atone for their deeds with such tapasyā! Mareechi was rewarded with his skin reverting to fair, and Lord Vishnu granted his ascendance into heaven.

May the person that reads and mulls over the lessons of these sacred legends of Gayā find peace in the afterlife.

5

Bodh Gayā

Bodh Gayā holds a special rank among the places of pilgrimage. The mere mention of Bodh Gayā is enough to make me bow my head with reverence.

In the olden days, this place was called Uruvelā. It was 2,500 years ago that a young man sat under a peepal tree on the banks of the river Nerañjarā. His eyes were sunken like wells and yet dripped with compassion, austerity, and shone brightly. His body was a mere heap of bones so much so that you could count his ribs. His hair, moustache and beard were overgrown, nails long and discolored due to prolonged fasting. Outwardly, he looked serene and composed, but inside him raged a fierce battle. Even the great battle of Mahābhārata paused at sunset. His battle continued non-stop, day and night. The battle of Mahābhārata lasted eighteen days; this young man's war started in real earnest after eighteen days of fighting. His battle was not waged against any human enemy. He was fighting the demon Māra, man's evil and eternal foe.

This brave lone warrior was fighting his war for the good of all mankind. His grave determination was : I cannot stand the suffering of my fellow humans anymore. Was mankind created to suffer like this for ever? There must be some way, some remedy to alleviate this pain. If that solution exists, what better way to spend my life

than in search of it? And, if that remedy cannot be found, what is the point in living at all?

That was not just this man sitting there; that was the hope of the Indian nation's entire belief system hanging in balance. The young man was like a second coming of Nachiketā[13] – the idol of youth, the ultimate believer, courage personified. He was the true heir to the tradition of Dhruv,[14] the seeker of his own permanent abode; his own resolve was equally strong. He was fully determined that his body may desiccate and shrivel away, his skin, flesh and bones may vaporize, but he was not going to move from his seat until… until he had learned Bodhi, the ultimate truth, attained enlightenment about the emancipation of the soul from cycles of rebirth.

True resolve rarely fails to achieve results. The young man's quest was successful. His given name – Siddhārtha[15] – was more than justified by his great achievement. Prince Gautama ceased to be Gautama and became Buddha – the enlightened one. Immediately after the moment of his enlightenment, a sympathetic nun arrived with a bowl of kheer and offered it to the young man to break his fast.

That place is now Bodh Gayā. The Mahābodhi Temple, the great and impressive edifice, stands close to the ancient tree under which Gautama Buddha concluded his long and arduous quest for ultimate knowledge. The Chankramana Shrine is located north of the temple. Huge trees surround the complex and grace the area like ancient rishis (sages). One wonders how many cycles of seasons these trees have endured, sheltered how many animals and witnessed the faith and devotion of how many thousands of believers!

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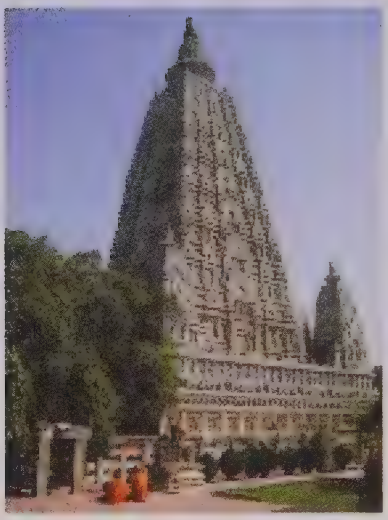
13 Nachiketā: The boy from Hindu mythology who matched wits with Yama, the god of Death, and learned from him the path of realising Brahman i.e. emancipation of the soul from rebirth.

14 Dhruv: The child in Hindu mythology who, denied a seat on his father's lap, did hard penance to Lord Vishnu and was granted his own immovable position as Dhruv Taarak, the North Star.

15 Siddhārtha: (Sanskrit) He who achieves his objective.



We sat under one of those trees and took in the serenity of the surroundings. Drawing water from a well, we drank and washed our feet, and then entered the temple with a peaceful heart. Inside, we saw Lord Buddha's majestic idol, and prostrating ourselves in front of it, we made our obeisance. Then we went up the stairs to the platform, walked around and observed the architecture of the shikhar [the tall central spire]. The scale of the carvings is impressive but they lack delicacy and innovation.

Descending to ground level, we circumambulated the temple. As I walked, every step brought forth a different emotion. My entire life flashed before my eyes, and then the vision went blank. As a swimmer dives deeper into the water, he is unafraid, and yet experiences something akin to fear. I experienced that same condition as I walked. In the past, I had done a lot of living, but had dwelt only on the surface of my life. At that moment, I was delving into the depths. On an earlier occasion, I had experienced something similar while meditating, but that had been only a skirmish compared to the tumult that was raging inside me now.

That tumult continued through my circumambulation, and even as I went to the rear of the temple to pay my respects to the Bodhi Tree.

I find it hard to describe my state of mind at that moment. When I had left home and set out for the Himālaya, I had no idea of where the future would lead me. I had cut all lines tying me to

the shore, and set all sails to full mast. I had not expected my ship to ever return to the port I had left. I was outwardly composed, but inside of me was a smouldering volcano. I was keenly aware of what I was giving up. I also knew that this awareness was an obstacle in the path of my spiritual progress. But try as I might, I was unable to suppress that awareness.

Then a voice spoke out from within : Going through the motions of a sacrifice is easy. But, it takes a real man to live up to the spirit of that sacrifice.

That was the jolt I needed to get my ego in check. I walked over and sat down on the bank of the lake – the Lotus Tank. The lake was filled with countless lotuses, but that day they failed to attract my usually beauty-loving mind. I got up and went to see the nearby gadhee – a fortified structure – inhabited by a large group of monks. The interior resembled an akhādā of bāwās – a monastery, but I was in no mood to make any further inquiry into it.

I have done much traveling in my life, gone on many pilgrimages, spent time meditating in the Himālaya and even found some answers. But that day's experience in Bodh Gayā was truly unique.

6

Belur Math

From Bodh Gayā we headed for Bengal. This was to be my first foray into that state.

After sleeping through the night in our train compartment, we woke up to the sight of 'rich of streams, orchards, and cool winds' soil of Bengal. Bengal is the land of lakes large and small. The Bengali word for lake is 'pukur' derived from the Sanskrit word 'pushkar.'

My last thoughts before falling asleep had been about where I was headed. I was going to see Bengal, the consecrated home of Rāmakrishna Paramahamsa[16] and Swāmi Vivekānanda;[17] the soil hallowed by Bipinchandra Pāl[18] and Aurobindo Ghosh;[19] the 'Bānglā'

16 Rāmakrishna Paramahamsa (1836–1886): A famous mystic, vedantin, influential figure in the Bengali Renaissance. His followers believed him to be an incarnation of God.

17 Swāmi Vivekānanda (1863–1902): Rāmakrishna's disciple and the founder of the Rāmakrishna Mission. Considered a major force in the revival of Hinduism in modern India. An intellectual of the highest degree, he introduced Vedanta and Yoga to the West and established Hinduism as a major world religion.

18 Bipin Chandra Pāl (1858–1932): A famed nationalist politician, renowned orator, journalist and writer.

19 Aurobindo Ghosh (1872–1950): Nationalist leader; philosopher, ascetic in later life.

of Khudirām Bose[20] and Kanailāl Dutta.[21] I would behold with my own eyes the land described in 'Ānandamath' and 'Devi Chaudhurāni.' My eyes had closed with those pleasant thoughts.

This first introduction to Bengal, however, started out on a sour note for me. It was the hot month of Vaisakh [around mid-April to mid-May], and Buwā had removed his daytime clothing and hung it above him before going to sleep. In the morning when we awoke, his clothes were gone! I felt sorry about the widespread poverty in Bengal. Had I seen the thief in action at night, I would have gladly given him my own clothes. Later, I donated all my clothing to Rāmakrishna Sewāshram in Haridwār, but that was for an altogether different reason.

We got off the train at the Liluāh station. Once outside, we asked for Swāmi Vivekānanda's Belur Math. To our surprise, nobody knew anything about Belur Math. Vivekānanda's fame had spread to all continents, but no one in Liluāh had a clue to where his Math was! What a shame! Several wrong turns later we managed to reach the town of Belur. There we ran into an old gentleman who offered to take us to Belur Math. After the morning's experience, I had not expected such courtesy around here. We followed him but, as luck would have it, the old man walked at a snail's pace. I was sad, not because of the time we were wasting, but for putting the elderly gentleman to such trouble. I told him, "Sir, we will find our way. We do not want to inconvenience you any further." He replied, "No, really, I want to go to the Math too." That left us no choice but to continue crawling at his speed.

Belur Math is situated on the bank of the Gangā. The separate memorials to Rāmakrishna Paramahamsa and Swāmi Vivekānanda

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20 Khudirām Bose (1889–1908): A young freedom fighter who went to the gallows before he was 19.

21 Kanailāl Dutta (1888–1908): Another young revolutionary that was sentenced to death.

are parts of the Math. A lighthouse-like red lamp structure stands at one end of the stretch.

We went and paid our respects to Swāmi Premānand – the head of the Math. "Come, sit down," he said and went right back to work. Meanwhile, two acolytes approached us. One of them asked, "What are your plans? How long do you propose to stay here?"

I must admit I was not prepared for that kind of reception. I had the clear feeling of being an unwelcome guest! I told him I was leaving the following day. Having so relieved his fears, I assumed that I could now talk. I asked one of them to direct me to the Swāmi Vivekānanda memorial. He said, "The building is still under construction. Swāmiji's marble statue is ready and is in his temporary memorial room. I can show that to you."

I had just finished my three-step pilgrimage of the holiest of Hindu shrines – Prayāg, Kāshi and Gayā. Visiting the Samādhi (memorial) of Swāmi Vivekānanda whose writings had restored my faith in religion, however, was a much greater pilgrimage in my eyes. My heart was bursting with faith and devotion. I was but forty or fifty steps away from the object of desires I had nurtured for many years, within a few seconds of realising the true benefit of my pilgrimage. I was about to have an encounter with Swāmi Vivekānanda – the one that had awakened India from her agnostic stupor with his speech from the dais at the World Parliament of Religions[22] in America. The fact that I would see him only in marble did not detract from the high that my aching heart felt. We entered

22 The World Parliament of Religions: Chicago, September 11, 1893

the Samādhi chamber. I prostrated myself with extreme respect and humility, and went into a total trance for a few moments.

We returned to the riverbank and bathed at the ghāt there. Near the ghāt, we saw a long row of large storage vats. I asked an acolyte what those were. He said, "We are very close to the mouth of the Gangā. The ocean being that close, at high tide its water rushes upstream and makes the river water salty. At low tide, the ocean recedes and the river water becomes fresh again. We fill these vats with drinking water when that happens."

After freshening up, we went into the temple. On the loft level, a copper box containing Rāmakrishna Paramahamsa's ashes is on display. A small picture of Rāmakrishna sits on top of the box, and is the object of worship there. A meditation room is located in the rear. I liked that facility very much. A permanent silence pervades the meditation room. Irrespective of how many people are meditating at one time, one can be sure of doing it completely undisturbed. People tiptoe in, sit down and tiptoe out of the room when finished.

As a rule, the Bengalis pay particular attention to being quiet as they enter or leave an assembly in progress, being careful not to disturb the others. If one needs to pass through a group of people sitting, he does so bending low and with an outstretched hand pointing in the desired direction. Going through a crowded place, he makes his way out with an apologetic face.

We meditated in that small chamber. We sat in front of Rāmakrishna's memorial and quietly chanted verses from the Geetā and the Upanishads. I noticed that the content and the purity of my Sanskrit pronunciation made a good impression on the acolytes present.

From the temple, we returned to the Math. Swāmi Vivekānanda's old room is on the upper floor there. It has been preserved exactly as it was when he lived there. The mattress that Swāmiji had slept on, his phento (thickly folded turban), his kafni nightshirt and cap

that would cover his ears, kamandalu (the big wooden water pot), his hookah water pipe – all his personal items are neatly laid out. All I could do was peek through the doorway and then turn back. An ordinary visitor like me would never be permitted inside that room.

As an unknown wandering monk, the great man had gone around the expanse of the Indian subcontinent and observed the prevalent state of Hindu religion vis-à-vis modern Indian society. The kamandalu – the large wooden utensil he had carried with him – drew more of my attention than the rest of his effects. What precious experiences lay hidden in the bowels of that kamandalu?

Lunch-time arrived. I knew that fish was a regular part of the Bengali diet. I went to the head Swāmi and informed him that I was a strict vegetarian. He told me not to worry because they only served vegetarian food anyway. We sat down to eat. This was my first experience with Bengali food. Bengali diet consists principally of rice and curry – in this case vegetable curry. Vegetables were of such variety and so plentiful that I began to wonder if the vegetables – not the rice – were really the main component of the meal.

About a year ago, I had given up hot condiments and seasonings from my diet. The vegetable dishes here were seasoned with a liberal amount of chili powder in them. The vegetables were so hot that I needed a sip of water with every morsel I ate. Suddenly I noticed something that had congealed like ghee – clarified butter – on the banana leaf that my food was served on. I thought I had found my

antidote for the chili powder's heat. Not so! With my luck, it turned out to be the pulp of roasted potatoes with hot green peppers in it. Difficulties hound the luckless no matter where they go!

Somehow, I finished the meal and went to the garden to wash my hands. I thought rather than wasting that water, I would wash my hands over a flower bed and water it. I started to do so… and immediately some acolytes descended on me and started screaming bloody murder. They couldn't explain their problem in English, and I could not comprehend their Bengali. I eventually understood that the flowers from the tree above were offered to the Krishna idol in the temple, and my 'dirty' water would desecrate the tree.

I was a stranger, and this being my first offense, one of the acolytes proposed to forgive my transgression. The others, some with generous hearts and others because I think they did not know what else to do, accepted the proposal.

Gone was my pride in my Mahārāshtrian heritage for cleanliness. Really, how could I even think of giving my unclean water to the tree that provided flowers for the pooja ritual? There is a sub-caste called Lingāyat in the state of Karnātaka. The members of this group do not accept even drinking water from a non-member. Not only that, a really observant Lingāyat would drink milk only from hay-fed cows, and water fetched by a Lingāyat! Our scriptures clearly advise us: Purity of food is essential for purity of the soul.

It was afternoon and the brahmachāris – the acolytes – had a lull from their hectic routine. I spent some time with them. One of them happened to be a Muslim. He had become a Kāli[23] worshipper, and spent much of his time translating the teachings of Rāmakrishna. He asked me if I had read the teachings of Guru Mahārāj (Rāmakrishna).

When I said yes, he tested me, 'Then tell me, why is Kāli's complexion so dark?'

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23 Kāli: The Hindu Goddess of time and change.

I answered, 'The sky is of dark complexion. The sky is endless. So is Kāli – endless. Therefore, so is Kāli, dark-complexioned.'

He said, 'That is correct.'

I had passed the test, and was now considered fit to participate in their theological discussions. I was fired up and was itching to counter-test him.

I said, 'Will you explain the essence of Swami Vivekānanda's poem "Kāli, the Mother"?' He said, "Let's go see Swāmi Pragnānand. He will explain it to you."

That spoiled my game. Although I had no desire to continue the charade any further, I had little choice but to show a straight face to Swāmi Pragnānand, and feign curiosity. He asked, 'What do you think is the hidden meaning of this poem?' I gave him a brief answer. He simply said, 'That is correct,' and I was off the hook.

This Swāmi Pragnānand turned out be a very interesting person. His original name was Debobroto Bose. In early life, he was a well-known member of Brāhmo Samāj[24], and a man of great social standing. He was among the accused in the Alipore Bomb case, but was finally acquitted. The court case ran for a long time, and he was incarcerated for its duration. Some people find their life's first solitude in jail, grab their opportunity for serious introspection and change the entire course of their subsequent lives. That is exactly what happened to Debobroto Bose. He quit the Brāhmo Samāj, took up Vedānta, renounced his family life and became Swāmi Pragnānand. After arriving in Belur Math, he wrote a series of articles entitled India's Spiritual Quest in the Bengali monthly Udbodhan. In this splendid treatise, he presented his considered views on what God had planned for India to contribute to the world. Later in his life, this Swāmi became the Head Monk at the Māyāvati Math in Himālaya, and published a monthly named Prabuddh Bhārat. After a few years of that, he ended his worldly existence by taking samādhi[25].

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24 Brāhmo Samāj: An influential socio-religious movement in Bengal.

25 Samādhi: The departure of one's soul from the physical body as a result of total and intentional cessation of all bodily activity, including breathing.

After that, I wanted to meet M, the author of The Gospel of Sri Rāmakrishna and, if possible, to pay my respects to Rāmakrishna Paramahamsa's wife and disciple, Sri Shāradā Mātā. M was fondly addressed as Māster Moshāy, 'the gentleman teacher'.

I took my leave from Swāmi Pragnānand, the head monk. He sent an acolyte to escort me to M's place. We crossed the river in a small rowboat and took a steam launch from there to go to Kolkāta.

The brahmachāri was a very friendly person and we had a long chat. Like many Bengali youths, he had started out as a revolutionary. Later, as his religious tendencies gained intensity, his interest in politics waned and he had joined the Rāmakrishna Mission.

I asked him what the guiding principle in his life was.

He said, "My initiation in the Order requires that I spend my life working to better myself and towards happiness of the entire world. All of us acolytes have been told that our lives should be as hard and austere as a soldier's; that our intellect should be capable of discussing the most difficult philosophical topics; that we should be hardy and capable enough to toil in farms, and worldly wise enough to go and sell our produce in the market."

In the mere two days we spent together, I grew very attached to this acolyte. He demonstrated to me the affectionate and emotionally sensitive nature of the Bengali psyche. I will not ever forget him.

We arrived at Māster Moshāy's (Mahendranath Gupta's) residence. We were told he was in his daily worship ritual, and so we waited. And then we saw his impressive presence emerge through the door. He was dressed all in white and his long beard adorned his chest. The most striking aspect of his face was the gravity and humility that radiated from it.

He sat down on the floor. Gunāji, a friend of mine, had translated The Gospel of Sri Rāmakrishna into Marathi and I had participated in that endeavor. So, our talk began with that topic. After becoming somewhat familiar with my background, he concluded, "So, the translator of The Gospel is not a mere scholar, he is an ascetic as well!"

Our visit there was short. From there we proceeded to the Udbodhan House to have an audience with Sri Sri Mā. Sri Sri Mā is the revered Shāradā Mātā.[26]

Swami Sāradānand occupied a small office near the entrance. He, as the First Secretary, oversees the huge worldwide family of organizations under the Rāmakrishna Mission umbrella. That makes him a tremendously busy person. He sits on a mat on the floor, bare-chested, with his legs stretched out in front of him, and works all day long. I noticed that he had a huge belly, perhaps the result of his sedentary lifestyle coupled with a Bengali diet. The good old adage 'an ascetic must keep moving' dawned on me with a totally new meaning.

"Namo Nārāyan[27]", I greeted him with folded hands. "Nārāyan", he offered his blessings. Those words form the traditional greeting for a sanyāsi. Greetings over, we went inside to the Mother's residence.

We had to wait a while before being permitted into the Mother's presence. Rāmakrishna's followers believe Sri Shāradā Mātā to be Goddess Durgā's incarnation. Nothing of significance is ever done without her approval. I offered my respects to her with utmost reverence. Accepting her husband as her teacher, she had offered the purest form of service during his lifetime; and for the rest of her life, she had devoted all her time in meditation and worshipping her sainted husband's memories. Being in the holy presence of this saintly person, the ideal wife and yet a celibate woman was an incomparable blessing for me. I prostrated myself to her. Any talk was impossible due to the lack of a common language. All I did was to keep my eyes on her feet with all the reverence and appeal I could muster. She offered her blessings with motherly love. Our audience was over and we returned to the Math.

The next day happened to be the full moon of the Lunar month of Vaisākh. This being the birth Anniversary of Gautam Buddha, the Math was celebrating it as Bodhi-utsav – the Buddha Festival.

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26 Shāradā Mātā: Shāradā Devi (1853–1920), wife of Rāmakrishna.

27 Namo Nārāyan: I bow to the Lord.

In the village of Khardah on the bank of the Gangā, there was to be a celebration of Chaitanya Mahāprabhu. The Math people had also been invited to join in. Swāmi Pragnānand asked me to go along, and we went there the next day.

7

In the Hallowed Land

The town of Khardah has a special place in the annals of Bengal's religious history. This is where the Nedānedi were purified by the grace of Sri Chaitanya Mahāprabhu[28]. Who these Nedānedi were or why they needed purification is unclear. Some people believe that they were Muslims, while another group believes them to be descendants of the survivors of Malik Kafur's[29] fourteenth century purge of the Buddhists.

Travelers get to listen to the history and legends of the places they visit, but they rarely have the time to get into serious discussions about these. When time permits, they indulge their imaginations about such things.

When the Nedānedi were purified, they themselves did not know their own identity. They had no idea why they were being shunned. All they knew was that society did not want to mix with them and kept them segregated. Had they known the reason for this intense dislike, they would have tried to correct that situation.

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28 Chaitanya Mahāprabhu (1486-1534): A Hindu saint and social reformer in eastern India including present-day Bangladesh. Chaitanya was a proponent for the Vaishnava school of Bhakti yoga (loving devotion to Krishna).

29 Malik Kāfur: The Muslim general who plundered much of India in the early 14th century.

And the members of society themselves did not know the reason for this boycott of the Nedānedi. The tradition called for shunning the Nedānedi, and not doing so would be sacrilegious. The ancient rishis were omniscient, and they laid down these laws; we do not understand these things, and never will. Even to look for any rationale behind such things would be presumptuous, and against religion. Therefore, keep doing what has always been done. This was society's outlook.

And, what about the Nedānedi? They believed that God had created them as untouchables. Our bad karma accumulated from previous births must have resulted in this low-caste birth. The folks belonging to higher castes must have done good deeds in previous births, and now have the right to despise us, to treat us like dirt and to call us names.

In short, neither side had sensed any injustice in that matter. Into that environment in Bengal arrived Sri Chaitanya Mahāprabhu's Bhakti movement. Mahāprabhu did not like such treatment of human beings. The Nedānedi people were told, "Bad luck has no sway over the Almighty's house. Feel free to worship the Lord, because you are as virtuous as the rest of us." The Nedānedi were sanctified and became Vaishanavites.

There is little doubt that this 'purification' was met with strenuous opposition. The proud 'protectors' of orthodox Hindu customs must have spared no effort in trying to stop this sacrilege. Today, history has forgotten even their names. The ageless Hindu religion has never lacked the strength to free itself from the clutches of blind overzealous followers. Perhaps, that is why it is alive and vibrant to this day.

Taking a rowboat ride on a river is a poetic experience that is difficult to match. We had started right after lunch and must have arrived in Khardah around 3 pm. The day being Vaisākhi Poornimā, a merciless hot sun was beating down on us. However, that onslaught of hot rays was made tolerable by the gentle breeze wafting over the cool flow of Mother Gangā.

The brick and mortar ghāts along the rivers in this part of the country are interesting to see. The village women carrying their water from the river was a pitiful sight to behold. Their saris being quite short in length were wrapped rather tight around their bodies. It was quite clear to me that such snugness made their physical movements quite uncomfortable; their faces, surprisingly, showed no sign of any kind of distress.

The courtyard of the main temple in Khardah was filled with huge crowds of people singing bhajans. Jhānjh – the big cymbals, manjeerā – the much smaller variety of cymbals, karatāls – a wooden pair of percussion instruments and the mrudung drums were accompaniments to the singing. The singers and accompanists alike were so immersed in their devotional ecstasy that they performed as if possessed by powerful spirits!

I have seen devotees in such ecstatic condition [at the Vithobā Temple] in Pandharpur, Mahārāshtra. But, the expression of ecstasy there is noticeably restrained compared to this. Here, people seemed to be trying to out-perform one another in making a display of their devotion. The multi-instrument accompaniment and the trance-like behavior of some people definitely created a highly charged ambience, but not what I thought would provide lasting natural susteanance to one's devotion. I would call it a form of intoxication at best.

After that, we proceeded to the residence of the host who had invited the Belur Math's sanyāsis and acolytes. He insisted that we have a bite to eat. I had removed sugar from my diet, and also ate only one full meal a day. Hence, I opted to have some watermelon only.

No effort was spared in pushing more and more food on the guests. When the Math's sanyāsis refused to accept more, the host said, "Leave whatever you don't like in your plates. We would be happy to accept your leftovers as blessed food for us."

I abandoned any pretense at civility to the host, and said, "I am of the opinion that eating food left on someone's plate is contrary to

good religious behaviour. Doing so may be an affectionate gesture, but it is a violation of religious self-restraint."

I delivered that opinion and picked up a tumbler of water in my left hand and started drinking from it. A Bengali youth saw that and cried out, "What do you think you are doing? You are drinking with your left hand!"

I replied, "My right hand is not clean from eating watermelon. I do not want to soil the tumbler with that."

The young man laughed with clear disdain. His probable thoughts were, 'How would this ill-bred person know right from wrong, of what hand to use for what? The left hand is used for bodily clean-up [after bowel movement]. How can you drink water with that hand?' The question in my mind was, why does this disgust for the left hand disappear when one needs both hands to knead dough for making bread?

We Indians have very set but localised concepts of cleanliness, purity, modesty, of virtuous versus forbidden, clean versus unclean. Localised in that, these concepts differ from province to province, and even locally, from one social group to another. In Kashmir, people would keep their hands clean by using the long sleeves of their tunics to hold pieces of bread while eating; they would buy fruit from a butcher shop and eat it unwashed. Those same people laughed to see me use my hands to put my shoes on! I recommend to those of my countrymen with strong religious beliefs that they go and become household guests of people of another province for a couple of months. I firmly believe that this would drastically alter their concept of religion.

The refreshments were followed by some singing. I expressed the desire to hear someone sing Rabindranath Tagore's song Ayi bhuvanmanamohinee[30] – O World Enchanter. There were quite a few young men singing, but none seemed anxious to sing that

30 Ayi bhuvanmanamohinee: One of Rabindranath Tagore's best known lyrics, set to music by himself, addressing the motherland as 'O world enchanter.'

song. One of them even said that they sang only religious hymns there. Finally, in order not to disappoint a guest, someone sang the song, and everyone else quietly endured it! I do suspect that some among the youths were iconoclasts anyway and, therefore, enjoyed it.

One person asked me what I thought of the physical health of the Bengali people.

My answer was, "In general, they look kind of weak of body."

He looked me over and laughed. I sensed the scorn and replied, "I hope you don't take me as a typical Mahārāshtrian."

At that, we both laughed. He admitted, "We must change our rice-based diet. We do need to eat wheat to cultivate strong bodies."

The rural life of Bengal is simple but beautiful. Their huts have graceful and good-looking roofs. The walls are beautifully coated with colorful clay. Music is in the air wherever you go. It is my belief, though, that the strictly enforced caste system must work against the creation of cohesive unity in the typical Bengali village.

Khardah is a relatively small town, and yet it boasts of real scholars among its populace who continue to pursue knowledge without any expectation of earning big names for themselves.

The sun was about to set when we started back. We were going downstream and the river's flow just pulled us with it. The acolytes were singing hymns written by Rāmprasād.[31]

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31 Rāmprasād Sen: An eighteenth-century poet who wrote 'Rāmprasādi' hymns to the Goddess Kāli.

8

Ayodhyā – Rāma's City

Buwā, my travelling companion, was a member of the Rāmdāsi sect.

When Shankarāchārya[32] decided to bring some organisation to the world of sādhus, he set up a structure that defined ten groups of sanyāsis, established four maths (monasteries) and grouped the acolytes into four categories. That day, the lives of Hindu sādhus turned over a new leaf, into a well-ordered arrangement.

In the field of religion, Shankarāchārya was a conqueror like Samudragupta and Napoleon, an organizer like Rājā Todarmal and Shivāji, a poet like Tulsidās, as confident in his beliefs as Lord Buddha, a literary man of the calibre of [Sant] Jñāneshwar, and an intellectual comparable to the ancient sage Vyāsa. The legacy of the structure he developed for the Sanātani (orthodox) Hindus remains to this day. Shri Shankarāchārya must be regarded as the supreme authority, the unquestioned ruler of the Hindu religion.

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32 Ādi Shankarāchārya (788–820AD): A Hindu theologian, philosopher; he consolidated the doctrine of Adwaita – the unity of the Soul and the Whole. He brought organization to the Hindu monastic orders, and the four Maths – monasteries – he founded continue to be the principal seats of organized Hinduism.

The ten groups of sanyāsin have names like Giri, Puree, Bharatee, Teerth, Saraswatee. Then, among the four categories of acolytes (Brahmachārin) is one called the Swaroop Sampradāy; their math is in Ayodhyā. It is believed that Samarth Rāmdās – the person credited with giving a concrete form to Mahārāshtra's religious renaissance – was himself a member of that Ayodhyā math and the Swaroop Sampradāy.

On our way to Ayodhyā, Buwā, a devout Rāmdāsi, exhibited such an ecstatic state of devotion that even a stranger could have seen that his mind was not in its natural state.

> *Hanumant is in our family,*
> *Our ancestral Lord of the Swaroop Sampradāy*
> *[He resides] in Ayodhyā Math.*

This aspiration to visit that Ayodhyā Math is something that the members of the Rāmdāsi sect recite every morning and evening. For Buwā, going there meant the fulfillment of this lifelong desire.

In all my travels, three places of pilgrimage have made deep impressions on me: Ayodhyā, Haridwār and Amritsar. I don't know why, but I felt a special joy at those three locations. I did not know anybody at any of the three places. And yet, the very sights and the ambience of each of these holy places have caused extraordinary happiness and elation in my heart – of a very similar nature, but at very different times in my life.

Pilgrims carry a grand mental image of Kāshi prior to their first visit there, and the real Kāshi certainly lives up to most people's expectations. As the boat-ride on the Gangā takes one past ghāt after ghāt, the usual reaction from most people tends to be, "I had never imagined that Kāshi would be so beautiful, so grand to behold!"

The Ayodhyā experience is just the opposite of that. As the legendary capital of Lord Rāma's golden reign,[33] the very mention of Ayodhyā sends one's imagination soaring into a magnificent vision

33 Rāma's Reign: रामराज्य has become synonymous with the ultimate in benevolent rule of law and order.

of a sprawling and beautiful city. Those huge expectations turn into disappointments as one reaches the Ayodhyā railway station. Day in and day out, tens of thousands of pilgrims visit Ayodhyā, but no attempt is made to provide any facilities for those multitudes. The painfully obvious fact is that today's government cares little about the native population of India, and not at all for the poor of this country.

Over time, the flow of the Saryu river has moved a good distance away from the ghāt. The river is pretty wide and the beach between the ghāt and the river is sandy. Bullock carts used to have great difficulty navigating the sand, and the locals developed an ingenious way around that problem, by laying pairs of wooden planks on the sand for the cart-wheels to tread. The cart path runs at an angle and is pretty long. The whole path is laid with these rail-like planks and the carts move on them with ease. This, however, was not the end of the problem. Every windstorm buried the planks under the sand. Finding the cart-path from under all that sand would practically require archaeological help! But the smart locals solved even that problem. They erected a hedge on each side of the path – a two-foot high hedge of thorny bush, short brush and tall grass. The hedge is meant to stop the wind-blown sand outside the hedge. Retaining walls made of piles of sand on the inside prevent the wind from bending the hedge inwards. Still, every time the river overruns the path during a flood, it needs to be reconstructed after river waters recede. If Mother Nature had not created camels, people of the Sahara desert would have needed to devise a heavy duty arrangement of this kind!

Returning after taking a dip in the holy river, the city of Ayodhyā and its ghāts suddenly come into view. An exclusive use of lime whitewash gives Ayodhyā temples their pristine white appearance. That post-bath return to the city is quite an experience. The big bells in the river-facing temples toll as if to greet you as pilgrims come and go with a variety of shining water containers, small and large, in their hands. Many of them have platters arrayed with sandalwood paste, red kumkum powder and petals of flowers. Everyone shouts slogans proclaiming their allegiance to Lord Rāma, his consort,

goddess Seetā, and his loyal follower Lord Hanumān. How can such an experience not make a permanent imprint on one's mind? Even in someone with-head as dense as a rock, this episode will be eternally etched like the edicts of Ashoka[34] inscribed on stone boulders.

Bathed and cleansed, we set out on our pilgrimage tour of the city. Can there be an Ayodhyā without monkeys? The epic Rāmāyana recounts the story of Rāma finding his abducted wife Seetā and conquering Lankā with the help of monkeys. For all we know, he seems to have returned the favor by bequeathing the reign of Ayodhyā to the monkeys! To this day, monkeys reign supreme in the city. Historians believe that even in ancient times, merchandise exported from southern India included peacocks and monkeys. Could it be that Rāma brought back a group of monkeys and settled them here when he returned from the South? Anthropologists tell us that new settlers tend to multiply rather quickly. That factor may have helped the rapid growth of the monkey population in Mathurā and Vrindāvan as well. Today their members enjoy a more affluent lifestyle than their kin in Ayodhyā.

Ayodhyā has many temples and countless idols of deities. But the idol in the Vishnu Temple inside the royal palace is extraordinary. Carved from a beautiful black stone, the suggestion of a dark green tint makes it even more attractive. The romantic devotees have attributed a 'black beauty' to the image of Lord Krishna. That artistic imagination is vividly brought to life in this beautiful idol.

It was shortly before noon when we got to that temple. The Brahmin priests had gathered for the āratee ritual. Some sweet and melodious voices were singing :

He is the truth, the knowledge;
He is eternal, ceilingless, infinite.

Every part of the palace had a sign indicating the name of that particular section. I noticed that all the names of places were written in Sanskrit.

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34 Emperor Ashoka (304–232 BCE): The Maurya Dynasty ruler who unified almost all of the subcontinent and left the first tangible evidence of Buddhism in his 33 edicts on stone pillars and boulders throughout today's Pakistan, India and Nepal.

The principal place of pilgrimage in Ayodhyā seems to be the Hanumān Garhi[35] and gets the biggest crowds. Some of the devotees make an offering of coconut, and some others offer sweets. Some would use a hand-swung fan on the idol of Hanumān. The large fan is operated by a rope that runs and hangs outside the temple. The believer would pull the rope and feel greatly privileged. I was deep in thought about whether it was appropriate to fan the son of Vāyu, the wind god. Any discussion of the matter with Buwā was out of the question. He was in an ecstatic trance. When the special offering he had brought was presented to the Hanumān idol, tears of joy flowed from his eyes. He felt blessed, and witnessing his devotion made me feel blessed as well.

Coming down from the [47-steps high] fortress, we visited the presumed birthplace of Lord Rāma, and other places mentioned in the epic Rāmāyana. I heard some talk of these places having fallen victim to the intolerance of our Muslim brethren. All these places languish today in a condition not even remotely suggestive of their ancient glory.

Just as Kāla Bhairav is considered to be the guardian deity of Vārānasi, so is Shree Matta Gajendra mentioned as the protector of the city of Ayodhyā. I was unable to learn the origin of this legend or the protector's significance.

Concluding our tour of the temple visits, we went to a Brahmin's house. Our purpose there was to have lunch, but the abominable uncleanliness of his compound was sufficient to kill our appetites. A roughly ten-inch square slab of rock lay in the middle of the courtyard. When we arrived there, the Brahmin's daughter squatted on that rock and was in the process of brushing her teeth – at mid-day! Shortly after that, a young boy defecated close to it, and his mother washed him while he sat on the rock. Before the rock was even dry, the mother washed the rock with water and ground chutney paste on it. The house was littered with clothes and cooking utensils. Smoke rose from the wood stove, and so spewed foul language from the mouth of the Brahmin himself. We ate what we could bear to, paid an appropriate amount for the meal… and left Ayodhyā.

35 Garhi: Fortress

The nearby city of Faizābād being the district seat, there are no Government offices located in Ayodhyā. All important people live in Faizābād. Ayodhyā's population is mainly the pilgrims, and the pandās and sādhus that live off them.

A big majority of those sādhus are the nāgā bāwās. These bāwās are extremely orthodox, do not eat food cooked by anyone else and seem to smoke their clay pipes all day long. The briefest of langoti underwear covers their midsections and necklaces of large wooden beads lay around their necks. Their entire days are spent talking of 'Rāmji' (Rāma), singing verses from the Tulsi Rāmāyana[36] in the most discordant of voices, and thereby murdering peace and tranquility of the vicinity.

Nonetheless, there is also much good that these people have to offer. They are extremely clean, and generally in very good health. Wherever they go, they set up a small makeshift temple, constantly preach to the locals and rhythmically ring the bell, announcing evening ārati. As a rule, they are not quarrelsome. When they do get into fights though, committing a murder or two means little to them. These people are in mortal awe of the police. Two groups of bāwās may fight each other furiously, but if the police show up, at the snap of a finger they start behaving like bosom buddies. Bāwās are one Hindu institution that we have neither learned to put to good use, nor have any idea how to reform!

Shree Sahajānand Swāmi, whose Swāminārāyan sect has taken deep roots in Gujarat, hailed from Ayodhyā.

I visited Ayodhyā again three years later and found that visit as refreshing and pleasant as this first visit. Our [Hindu] elders have put Ayodhyā first among the seven cities of pilgrimage that are said to liberate one's soul from the cycles of birth and rebirth:

Ayodhyā, Mathurā, Haridwār, Kāshi, Kānchi, Avantikā and Dwārikā
These are the seven cities that can set our souls free.

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36 Tulsi Rāmāyana: *Rāmacharitamānas*, the epic Hindi poem-scripture written by Tulsidās (1532–1623 AD)

9

On the Way to Almorā

Rāmakrishna Paramahamsa advised that those who seek the liberation of their souls should first try to fulfill their minor, harmless desires; and only then concentrate all their effort into fighting the major desires that block their path to salvation.

Buwā and I, in a way, were on a quest for that liberation. Both of us had developed an intense dislike for the routines and attachments of worldly life. I, for one, had always nurtured this strong desire to complete the three-shrine pilgrimage, and to visit and pay my respects to the revered people and shrines of the Rāmakrishna Mission. Buwā's lifelong passion was to visit Ayodhyā. With our desires thus satisfied, we both felt as light as clouds that have shed their loads as rain. We were ready for our Himālayan trek.

To me, the fulfillment of a resolution is as satisfying as performing a shrāddha at Gayā. Having accomplished what we had set out to do, our last night in Ayodhyā was spent in what was almost yoganidrā -- the ultimate in deep sleep, devoid of all thoughts and desires. Dreams were absolutely out of the question. When we woke up in the morning, both of us felt like persons reborn. Until the previous night, we were like any other human beings. We were travelers like all the other pilgrims on the road. Today, we had nothing but the Himālaya in our thoughts.

We boarded this unbelievably crowded train. Watching the passengers fight for seats, I thought to myself, 'Please be patient with us, folks. This is our last journey. We will not be back to crowd you any more.'

But how were those poor folks to read my thoughts? Who knows how many people resign their membership of this material world and fade away into the retirement zone every year! The ever-changing world takes no notice, nor does it gain or lose anything from it. But how serious is such a decision for the person taking that step! What thoughts must the ageing Tolstoy have been thinking when he left home for the last time!

The Indian Railways started service in Northern India in 1853, almost seventy five years ago. But the public have yet to get used to rail travel. They arrive at the station five or six hours ahead of the train's scheduled time. Some bribe the policeman there and buy the right to elbow their way ahead of the men and women already waiting [to be admitted to the platform]. They have yet to comprehend why Third Class passengers who are about to board must stay off the platform to let the alighting passengers get off the train first. Why is it so hard to understand that this would make life easy for both disembarking as well as embarking travellers? In any case, at least some people will try to jump the fence and get on the platform before the gate is opened to admit the Third Class passengers.

And, what happens once they're on the train? The bullies will stretch out on the seats even in broad daylight, with total nonchalance. The sitting passengers will sit cross-legged and almost bust a gut trying to occupy as much of the bench seat space as possible. Some will pile up their luggage right by the door, knowing fully well that the coach doors open inwards – in short, trying to add to the misery already heaped on travellers by the uncaring railway management.

To travel under such circumstances is like having to do a huge penance. By the time you are inside a railway coach, Darwin's

theories on the struggle for existence are proven over and over again for you. But, once you are in, Prince Kropotkin's hypothesis on 'cooperation not competition' seems to take control. Then the standing passengers acquire seats, the thirsty – caste rules permitting – get a drink of water; and of course, pān and sopāree are passed around while dohās (couplets) are belted out.

Storytelling is a favorite pastime on long stretches between stations. These days, the stories mostly center on the rain-deity's displeasure with humans, and the hardships of the resulting famine. The exploits of famous outlaws draw everyone's interest. A man in our coach started talking about this bandit from around Morādābād, and everyone listened with obvious sympathy for the bandits. The thought that kept churning in my mind was : these bandits or dacoits were the enemies of society; their very mention ought to evoke a sense of extreme dislike. So why did the general public still think of the dacoits with such benevolence?

As I continued to listen, the answer slowly came together. Many of these bandits do show traces of high moral character. These gentlemen–bandits (!) do not victimise the poor; they do not molest women; some have been known to escort lone women in the dark of night as they would their sisters; they help provide medication and care to the sick; generously reward the Brahmin priests that cater to public needs; and carry a lifelong grudge against the police that treat the populace like dirt. The general impression among people is that these dacoits terrorise and rob only those blood-suckers that sue the unwary with falsified documents, who provide no relief to debtors even during the drought years, lenders that charge exorbitant interests and then gulp up the debtors' farms, those that hoard their grain and wait for the sky-high prices a famine would generate.

These simple folk do not understand the principles of justice and the law, nor the rights and duties of a citizen. All they understand and know is a life of unending hardships and rareness of happy experiences. It is natural that all this would foster a feeling of empathy for the dacoit-bandit-outlaw.

As soon as the discussion on dacoits was over, one bāwā started his discourse on the theory of karma and how the deeds of one's previous births accompany the person's soul [into future births]. 'This worldly life is meaningless, one's body and worldly possessions are only illusions. The only truth is the Lord's name (and, of course, the bread and loincloths provided to the "virtuous" bāwā-ascetics!), everything else is this illusory deception. What you did in previous births, you pay for in this birth, and there is nothing you can do about it.' That more or less summed up his understanding of Vedānta. As I have alluded to before, I had set out with the idea of becoming a sanyāsi myself. Listening to this man made me wonder, was this what I was going to become? Was this almost inane version of Vedānta going to lead me to moksha – the eternal freedom from the cycles of birth? How can it possibly lead India to its independence?

And then our train arrived at the Bareilly station. We were supposed to wait here for several hours for the connecting train to Kāthgodām. During that wait, we witnessed a splendid example of the idiotic behavior of some travellers.

This old man was getting ready to leave for Ghāziābād. His wife and two sons had come to the station to see him off. A servant clad in a dhoti as dirty as a kitchen washcloth had also come along. The old man spread out a large square cloth on the ground. Then he heaped on it a few of his dhotis, a large heavy cotton tunic, a water jar, some bedspreads, and much much more. Next, he tied two of the opposite corners into a knot. But try as he might, he was unable to reach both ends of the remaining two corners of the cloth. Finally, the elusive corners were brought under control with the help of the servant, and a good-sized squarish-round bundle took shape. Some Hindu scriptures describe a cube-shaped earth, which must look like that bundle. Then he inserted his well-aged hookah through the knotted opening – perhaps as a flag declaring his victory! The hookah sat there and kept silent. Its haughty demeanor left no

doubt, however, that when its time to gurgle arrived, its oratory would move the hearts of the best of the hookah-smokers!

When his train arrived, the old man ran towards a coach balancing the big bundle on his head. From ancient times, the art of guessing the size of the door [vis-à-vis the luggage] has eluded the human race, and the bundle just refused to fit through the door. The old man pushed with all his might to get the bundle in. Inside the coach, a passenger suddenly became aware of his own rights and started pushing the bundle out. The poor bundle was in hopeless state of suspension, like Trishanku of myth had found himself in — with the sage Vishwāmitra trying to push him into paradise and the god Indra trying to keep him out. It finally tumbled out and fell on the platform. The neck of the hookah fell off and broke into a hundred pieces. Seeing that, the old man's servant entered the fray with the fury of a cyclone. With his help, both the old man and the bundle finally made their way into the coach while the servant carried forth with a steady stream of lung-busting curses. The old man settled into a corner feeling sorry for his once-proud and now-meek-as-a-lamb hookah.

Having thoroughly enjoyed this side-show, we still had a long wait ahead for our train connection. Soon, we were extremely bored and Buwā proposed to spend the time cooking a meal. For the life of me, I couldn't see what, how or where we could cook at that station. But, Buwā wouldn't take no for an answer. He procured a fresh unused earthen pot from somewhere, put together three rocks under a tree near the station and then went looking for firewood. It took him a while but he returned with an armful of firewood. Then he went and got the ingredients required for making khichdi.[37]

Just about then, a policeman with a big paunch and small beady eyes walked over. In the most civil manner he was capable of assuming, he informed us that we were not to cook there, that the

37 Khichdi : Rice and moong bean splits cooked together.

property belonged to the Railway authority, and that – our fathers not being partners in the Railway business – we had no squatting rights there! For me, this was the first of such experiences, and I was fuming inside, but realised that I had no choice but to swallow the insult. Buwā, made of a different material altogether, was not about to give in that easily. Unfortunately, our train wouldn't wait for any satisfactory conclusion to our discussions. So, we turned over the ownership of all the gathered provisions, and the verbal abuse heaped on us, to a bāwā and boarded our train. The bāwā offered his blessings to my friend Buwā and promised, 'Don't you worry about the policeman. I am going to fix that s-o-b!'

The steamy hot air inside our coach made us feel as though we ourselves were being cooked like khichdi. We spent most of our time talking to a sādhu who had been on Himālayan pilgrimage, pumping him for all possible information.

He told us about this species of Himālayan fly; if it bites you in the calf, you get a huge boil that is so painful that it is difficult to walk even a step and you are virtually laid up for two or three days.

This sādhu carried a stick made of tejbal wood in his hand. He revealed to us the phenomenal properties of that stick.

"If properly cared for, this stick can make its carrier even see in the dark," he said.

I asked him how one could care for it properly.

'These "eyes" that you can see in its bark must be kept clean at all times. The stick must never ever touch the ground; it must be stowed in a place high off the ground when you go to sleep at night. After relieving yourself, you must bathe your hands and feet before touching it. You must not use it to kill a snake or a scorpion. These are the rules for its care. If they are properly followed, the stick will deliver on its awesome promise."

Such superstition in someone who had been on the move all his life and gained new experiences every single day made me think. Wasn't this a colossal waste of the evenrgy of the Hindu religion?

We should either close down this parasitical institution of sādhus that is such a big burden on society, or else some good intelligent people must join this group of sādhu-monks and patiently try to reform them. Who is to say which of these two alternatives will do the job that needs to be done?

The farther we got from Bareilly, the train got less crowded. We had room to spread out, to move about, to enjoy the travel – both physically and in our thoughts.

10

The Mountain Supreme

For most people living abroad, nostalgic memories of the motherland, a poignant sense of loss and the desire to return are ever-present in their minds. Mughal Emperor Bābar had won the throne of India and had no shortage of nectar-sweet mangoes to eat. And yet, he craved the watermelon from his Central Asian birthplace. Even if a return there was not possible in his lifetime, his wish was to have his remains buried in that distant motherland. Even a British officer, while living the princely life in India, covets the opportunity for a six-month leave to spend back home.

A Hindu is born with the same kind of intense desire to go to the Himālaya. Historians may think of the North Pole as the place of origin for Āryans, the linguists may bestow that honor on Central Asia, and the super-patriotic Hindus may attempt to prove that India itself was that origin. All this matters little to the common people of India. If the instinctive belief in their hearts and minds has any significance, then the Himālaya is the unquestioned origin of us Indo-Āryans. Rich or poor, old or young, man or woman – every single person wishes to see the Himālaya at least once in his or her life… to taste the life-giving waters of the Himālaya... to sit on one of its giant boulders and commune with the Creator.

When life's work is done, when the senses are weakened, when one is frail of body and the remaining days of life seem burdensome – that is the time to abandon this borrowed worldly existence and return to one's true home to die. This is the thought that motivates countless Hindus to give up all food-intake, and to walk in the Himālaya in the Northeasterly direction until their lives end.

Our ancient tradition also prescribes the same. If a king lost his kingdom, he would head for the Himālaya. Even characters like Bhartruhari who renounced their all found it difficult to master this allure of the Himālaya, and actually had that attraction grow only stronger. When a businessman is forced to declare bankruptcy, a seafaring merchant loses all his property when his ship goes down, someone's wife turns adulterous, someone's children desert him, someone faces a severe political or social calamity, someone's own misdeeds make him unfit to show his face to society — no matter what situation he faces, a devout Hindu will not resort to suicide. As much faith as a Hindu has for the limitless mercy of Lord Shiva, he places an equally unshakable trust in the Himālaya. Just like the Lord Pashupatināth[38] – the protector of all things animate – who resides there, the Himālaya is the refuge for those without refuge.

The Himālaya is where Chandragupta Maurya is believed to have contemplated the unification of India under one flag. Samarth Rāmdās Swāmi supposedly received his mandate to help liberate the national consciousness here, from none other than Hanumān, the emissary of Lord Rāma.

There is only one place on Earth where the true meaning of the Hindu philosophy comes to light spontaneously – here, in the lap of the Himālaya. Shri Vedavyāsa, legendary creator of the epic Mahābhārata, sat in its lap and worked on that ocean of wisdom. Shri Ādi Shankarāchārya completed his world-renowned bhāsyas (commentaries) on the Prasthānatrayi – the three canonical texts of

38 Pashupatināth: Lord Shiva. The Pashupatināth temple in Nepal is one of the major Shiva shrines.

Hindu philosophy there as well. This is also where Swāmi Vivekānand and Swāmi Rāmateerth did their thinking on how to apply elements of ancient Sanātan [Hindu] Dharma to the contemporary lifestyle. (I must also not forget to mention that Mahātmā Gandhi worked on his translation of the Anāsaktiyoga from the Gita in the Himālaya as well.)

This Himālaya – the place where the Āryans originated, the sacred ground where ascetics practised extreme austerities to gain spiritual evolution – is where self-driven people come to meditate in solitude, the tired come to rest, the disheartened come to find solace. This is the fatherland of religions, the final destination for those ready to leave this life, where those on spiritual quests feel at home, the abode of Lord Shiva, and the chosen repose at night for the immortal avadhoot[39] Guru Dattātreya.

The Himālaya is an incomparable supporter, not only of humans, but also of other members of the animal kingdom. It is the father of an untold number of rivers that eventually empty into the oceans. That ocean water becomes clouds and returns to the Himālaya for a visit. Kavikulaguru Kālidās – the doyen of all poets – described this 'soul of the gods, emperor of the mountains' as the standard by which our earth is measured.

That characterization seems entirely appropriate in many different ways. The Himālaya is heaven on earth, and the abode of the quasi-divine beings Yakshas and Kinnaras. The Himālaya is so vast as to absorb all the sorrows of the world. It is cool enough to douse the fire of all the anguish in the world. It is so wealthy as to swallow up Kuber – the treasurer of the gods. It rises to such heights as to be the ladder to reach heaven. We [Indians] have all known the Himālaya since our early childhood. Whether it is in stories for children or songs for them, in travelogues or tales of pilgrimage, in history or the scriptures, no matter where you look, the Himālaya is bound to figure in it. Even for the youngest among

39 Avadhoot : A very evolved Yogi.

us, the ideal and most beautiful place in their imagination is certain to have been derived from the mental image of the Himālaya.

One wonders, is there anything in the history of this world our Himālaya has not witnessed? He has felt millions of earthquakes and watched a thousand comets zoom by without blinking. He has given away his own daughter in marriage to Lord Shiva. With benevolent affection, he has marveled at Sati's frolicking and the 'birth of the war-god'[40]. He is an eye-witness to the severe austerities practised by several generations of the Raghu dynasty ending with Bhagirath. He helped make the Pāndava's final journey to heaven successful.

Why talk only about antiquity and myth? In the aftermath of the failed adventure of 1857[41], its dejected warriors and their leaders found refuge only in the Himālaya. It does not matter whether you are a geologist, you want to look at it from a zoologist's perspective, explore India's history, just want to behold grandeur personified, want to try and unravel the intricate puzzle of [Hindu] theology – the Himālaya is the one to show you the way. The Himālaya can, because it can testify to this Aryan land's efforts and accomplishments through the ages.

It would be difficult for me to pinpoint exactly when this desire to go to the Himālaya first surfaced in me. Most likely, I was born with it. Perhaps, as I said earlier, it was a part of my inherited national instinct. When one thinks of traveling, it is always in context of going away from home. In contrast, whenever I have thought of going to the Himālaya, it has always invoked in me a strong sense of going home and given me goosebumps. To this day, the mere mention of the Himālaya makes me as happy as a young married woman listening to someone talk about her father's distant household. A newlywed girl, having moved to an alien household,

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40 Kumārasambhav : The bard Kālidāsa's classic describing the birth of Kārtikeya, the Hindu war-god.

41The failed adventure of 1857: The first large scale fight for freedom from the British.

longs to return to her childhood home. As a result of that longing, the physical image of that faraway home is pushed aside and the young woman's mind creates a sentimental image of it instead. To her, this sentimental image is the real thing – the only real thing.

One characteristic of longing for something seems to be: how and what one desires the object of their longing to be. One's perception of that object assumes that form. If there indeed are omniscient beings in our world, more power to them! The rest of us mortals acquire most of our knowledge through first-hand experience. As such, that knowledge is not absolute knowledge; it has the additional coating of our feelings and sensory perceptions.

The sentimental image we earlier spoke of is not tainted by physical senses or desires. It is coloured by our feelings and our ideals. That is why that image touches closer to our hearts and seems much more real to us. Let the logician brand this thinking as false. Not all of life's experiences, and the hidden meaning of life, will pass the test of logic. The reason for that is, logic would insist that the world live by the schema it proposes; that which fails its tests can simply not be true. So be it.

The word pictures of the Himālaya that I am about to present to you are all, by necessity, images filled with love. If one has deep sentimental attachment to something, it is not possible to think of that object without those sentiments colouring one's thoughts. I hope my readers expect nothing more than those affectionate images from me.

11

Bhimtāl

The Himālayan region is considered to be divided into five sectors: Kashmir, Jalandhar, Garhwāl (or Uttarākhand), Kumāon[42] and Nepāl. Among these, Uttarākhand is of extreme [religious] importance. This is the sector that is home to some of the holiest sites of Hinduism. Gangotri, Yamunotri, Kedārnāth, Badrinārāyan, Pancha-Prayāg, Pancha-Kedār, Uttarkāshi, Jyotirmath and many other famous holy places are located in Uttarākhand. This used to be the chosen area for the saintly ascetics to spend their long years of tapasyā – intense meditation for spiritual advancement accompanied by the practice of severe austerities. With transportation becoming easier, the volume of pilgrim traffic has increased tremendously. Consequently, it is believed that many of these serious ascetics now shun the once popular Garhwāl area and choose hideouts in the Kumāon locations. Kumāon is a very beautiful and fertile region. Swāmi Vivekānand's Māyāvati Math is located in Kumāon.

By road, Māyāvati lies about 50 miles from Almorā. Busy people like us find it difficult to spare even a short twenty-four hour window of free time. To shake us out from that state was probably the reason Swāmi Vivekānand decided to set up his printing press in Māyāvati. He

42 Garhwāl and Kumāon are subdivisions of the Indian state of Uttarākhand today.

also relocated the activity of publishing the monthly Prabuddh Bhārat from Madras to Māyāvati. He used that publication to awaken the sleeping India and then to send the message of its awakening out to the world. He had also planned to start a school for spiritual studies there.

To get to Almorā, you take a train to Kāthgodām. Almorā is about 37 miles by road from there. Our train was packed with passengers until it reached Bareilly Junction. After that, the train slowly got less and less crowded. Most of the passengers got off at Haldwāni station. Kāthgodām, our station, was the terminus. That left so few of us on the train that it was actually depressing.

I said, "Buwā, this is what the Pāndavas must have felt when they attempted their ascent into heaven. We too are leaving the crowds behind and are climbing the Himālaya by ourselves. Why speak of the Pāndavas, this is the fate that awaits every human being! Every man must leave loved ones and, one by one, cut loose from the bonds of his physical senses to enter afterlife, with nothing but the record of the good and bad deeds of his life."

That state of detachment did not last long. In no more than a mile and a half after we started walking, the Himālaya started working its magic on us. We were walking along the bank of the Rāmgangā river. The river seemed to say : My son, stop thinking these meaningless worldly thoughts. Look around you. All these trees grow here, many dry up and rot away; these rocks rise, many break up; these hills fall apart and entire villages get swallowed up in the valleys. Here, nobody rejoices, none grieve about any of this. There is untold wealth here, as is nonchalant profligacy, and nobody gives a hoot about it. Around here, to worry about anything would indeed be a sin.

But the river's admonishment was not really necessary. My temporary depression would have disappeared anyway at the sights that surrounded us. The trees were in full bloom with their countless flower-offsprings. Their fragrance was exhilarating but not intoxicating. We moved ahead and pretty soon started climbing along the mountainous road. As we gained altitude, the mountain's eye-filling beauty and nature's grandeur grew with it.

When children go to an ocean beach and see clamshells with their mother-of-pearl sheen, they want to fill their pockets with the shells. After a while, they have seen so many of these shells that they start throwing away even the ones in their pockets. Perhaps they will keep the best one or two as mementos, but that will be it.

Five miles up that hilly road, we came to a mountain of that kind of memorable beauty. A landslide on its side had exposed most exquisitely beautiful rock faces of various colors. Our road twisted around that mountain, giving us its view from all directions. I wondered how nice it would be to be able to move that mountain to my native Mahārāshtra.

The very next instant, I thought to myself: would a king move something that looks very nice in one room of his palace to another room? The king owns all the rooms in his palace and whatever looks nice in one place obviously belongs there and nowhere else. If the people of Mahārāshtra are to enjoy the beauty of this place, they just have to come here.

Our people do a small amount of travelling on business, or for some social reason, but rarely venture out to see the natural beauty of our world or to visit holy places. Is it not our duty to visit holy shrines to pay our respects to our Creator? The ancient sages who had decreed that the pilgrimage known as the Chār Dhām[43] Yātrā was the epitome of piety were actually true patriots. Today, we probably retain some of that patriotism but far little of that piety for sure.

So, with a great deal of emotion, I called out, "Mountain, my friend, I will not disturb you. You stay right here. I will send my Mahārāshtrian brethren here to see you. When they visit, I beg you to welcome them with your sweet water and fragrant air. For now, please accept my humble respects!"

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43 Chār Dhām: Literally 'the four holy abodes' – Gangotri, Yamunotri, Badrināth and Kedārnāth.

There is something really strange about these mountains. You see a sky-reaching peak in front of you, and it makes you think that once you climb to the top, the way beyond will be all downhill. This feeling stays with you almost all the way to the top. But what do you see once you reach there? You find yourself at the bottom of an even bigger mountain! Goodness gracious! So, now we have to climb this monster too? If you are not too tired, optimism may take hold: 'Good, the higher we go, the farther we will be able to see, and will witness the vastness of nature. And if lady luck smiles on us, we may even see our first snow!'

By then, my desire to see the emperor of mountains sitting in quiet meditation, with a snow-crown on his head, had become painfully irresistible. But such a view was not in the cards for us that day. We reached the top of the second mountain with some difficulty – only to see a third looming above us. That more or less disheartened us. Was each of these mountains just a step on the staircase to heaven?

As the morning progressed, the sun got hotter. The air got almost uncomfortably hot, and nature around us seemed to assume its more frightening form. And then we arrived at the lake Bhimtāl.

I had seen beautiful lakes before, in real life as also through my mind's eye. Sir Walter Scott's Lady of the Lake had shown me an impressive word picture of a beautiful lake. In spite of all that, seeing Bhimtāl up close was a unique experience. That area's ancient name was Shashtikhāta (60 lakes) because of the number of large and small lakes there. Of those, Nainitāl and Bhimtāl are the better known lakes. Nainitāl is an exquisitely beautiful lake and is about fifteen miles from Bhimtāl. The city of Nainitāl has become a very European city and I will describe it in due course.

Bhimtāl is situated on a high elevation plateau. Formed in a valley bounded by three surrounding mountains, it is very deep and its water is crystal clear. It is roughly triangular in shape. Although quite beautiful by itself, Mother Nature has provided a small island in its middle to enhance the lake's beauty even further.

A cool breeze welcomed us as we arrived, and all our fatigue and heat instantly disappeared. We found the lake's shoreline rather difficult to navigate. Irregularly spaced rocks lined the entire shore, making it difficult to access the lake's water.

Easy or not, I had no strength to resist the lure of the beautiful lake. I mustered all my courage and stepped off the shore and into the water. Oh, Lord! The cold water bit into my skin like a thousand scorpions. I definitely felt that even the small girth of my thin body must have contracted by a good couple of inches. I thrashed about desperately, as if to save my life. But the joyful feeling that followed was purely indescribable. Had it not been for the sulking Buwā sitting on the shore, the thought of coming out of the water would never have occurred to me.

Would the Achchhod lake described by Bānabhatta have looked like this? Kādambari pervaded my thoughts. In my mind, I visualized a boat carrying Kādambari or Mahāshwetā coming around that islet. And sure enough, a white boat soon rounded the turn and came towards me. Alas, my poetic vision soon went up in smoke! In that boat sat two European soldiers with fishing rods in their hands. Were I the great sage Vālmiki, I would have let loose the most hideous curse on those unromantic Europeans.

That fall from those poetic heights also brought an awareness of how ravenously hungry I was. I ate to my stomach's capacity, took a long nap and rid my aching body of its fatigue. We woke up Rāmsinh, the porter, loaded him up with our baggage and set out for Rāmgadh.

Thus ended the first half-day of our Himālayan trek. We had travelled fourteen miles.

12

The First Lesson

Departing Bhimtāl, we moved on. The road was flat. We saw rows and rows of tents to our far left and learned that disabled soldiers lived there. We had finally reached the plateau at the top of that mountain and, being on the ever-comfortable flat terrain, were able to set a brisk pace.

But the Himālaya seemed intent on teaching us a few more lessons in that single day, and struck another big blow to our ego. Just like stories growing out of stories in The Arabian Nights and the Panchatantra[44], another mountain appeared seated atop the plateau we were on. It displayed the snobbish gravity of an ameer sprawled out in his throne borne on the shoulders of four carriers, fully and naturally aware of his greatness. Had he decided to get up from his throne, I was sure his head would have broken through the canopy of the skies!

We had to climb this monster, so we handed over even the smallest bit of our belongings to our porter. Leaving our egos at the foot of the mountain, and feeling as light as the fluffy clouds

44 Panchatantra: A collection of interwoven animal fables teaching ethical conduct of life with anecdotes. It is believed to be written around the third century BC and has been widely translated into world languages.

around us having shed all that weight, we started our climb. It continued well into the evening.

We saw a very peculiar species of flowers blooming along the way. Shaped like bārmāsi (periwinkle or Vinca Rosea), yellow in complexion like the color of cream on well-boiled milk, this flower is indescribably fragrant. Its fragrance was similar to that of a rose, but far more delicate. The sight of these shy and well-behaved flowers pleased me so much that all the fatigue of the road vanished from my limbs. It would be a shame to not know the name of such beautiful and hospitable flowers! But there was nobody on the road I could ask. Our porter considered it his porter-ly duty to keep his distance from us and had fallen way behind. We didn't have time to wait for him, but neither did I want to go on without learning the flower's identity.

Meanwhile, we saw a pahādi (mountain dweller) man come down a foot trail on the side of the mountain. These Himālayan foot trails are rather difficult to traverse – the backbreaking kind. I asked the man in Hindi – or what I considered Hindi at the time – some questions about the flower. He replied in pahādi Hindi. I seriously doubt that he had understood my questions. What I know for certain is I did not understand even a word of what he said. I did get the name of the flower from that conversation (some conversation!). Expending the effort of a scholar reading from and interpreting the arrow-head script carved on an Assyrian clay tablet, I figured out that the flower was called koojo. I was sure the word invoked a feeling of beauty in the pahādi language, but am sorry to say I was not the least bit enamored by the name.

We could see thick clouds on the distant horizon. A white marbly peak stuck out of the clouds. With the clouds covering the entire base of the mountain, the overall appearance was that of a baby Maināk[45] – a little winged mountain in flight. I learned the following day that what we had seen was the holy Nandādevi peak.

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45 Maināk : In Hindu mythology, mountains originally had wings. King of gods Indra cut the wings off, of all but Maināk who hid at the bottom of the ocean and kept his wings but never came out of the water.

We went a short distance downhill and reached the town of Rāmgadh. It had a small dharmashālā – a free public dormitory. An apology of a dharmashālā, it had a row of five-foot tall cells, with a small door in each, and not as much as a hole otherwise! I doubt that even a donkey would want to live in it.

We purchased some provisions – lentils, rice and potatoes – from the local bania merchant. The bania also gave us the pots to cook in. We thought, 'What a kind bania! Gives us the cooking utensils too!' Later we discovered that such was the custom of the mountains. The bania's price for the provisions included rental for the pots. Be that as it may, the custom makes a lot of sense. Our cooking, however, turned out to be so bad that neither of us could eat much of the meal.

The dharmashālā cabin's interior all but disgusted us, and we decided to set up our bedding outside and sleep under the open skies. But the Himālaya must have thought : Ok boys, time for your next lesson! The outside air turned so cold that, very much like a charmed cobra crawling into its assigned basket, we picked up our beddings and snuggled into the warmth of our suddenly attractive

cabin! We were convinced that the dharmashālā's architect had been more astute than the Mayāsur[46] of yore in providing walls without any windows.

We had walked almost non-stop for an entire day. This was our first 20-mile trek. Our stomachs were still growling from that miserable last meal, and the bitter cold did not help much either. Even with all that, and in spite of all my cajoling, sleep completely eluded me.

While the goddess of sleep jilted me, her eternal foes, anxiety and hypersensitive imagination, showed up instead. I started brooding. I had left behind my home, my social service work, my books and my column-writing for newspapers – and had come to this place! Why? The good Lord had put me at a place very suitable for the pursuits that had appealed to me. Why did I have to leave that comfortable situation and come to this unknown environment? I had felt an urge to renounce the material world, and the Himālaya was surely the ultimate haven for people like that. Was that the reason for my wanting to come here?

But, if the Himālaya was indeed such an inspirational place, what would make those white men snare fish in the lake at Bhimtāl? Why would the bania in Rāmgadh be extracting such big profits from his customers? The fact remained that the mountain people living up here behaved no differently from the plains people! Wives here got into fights with their husbands just as much; the Postmaster here complained that his son did not listen to him; people here loaded up their animals with an inhumane amount of work. On the plus side, there is no doubt that business activity up here has not grown, railway service has not arrived here, the population is very sparse and, the societal rot generally caused by those factors has not taken hold here.

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46 Mayāsur : The demon architect in Mahābhārata who built a palace filled with illusions for the Pāndavas.

The thought that I was in an alien territory – where I had no family, where nobody knew me, nobody spoke my language, where there was no sign of the renunciation I sought – made me extremely uneasy. I wrapped a blanket around me and, bucking the biting cold outside, stepped out of our cabin. I had resolved, for the duration of our Himālayan trek, not to wear any clothing that was stitched together. During the day, I wore a dhoti, kept a khes[47] on my shoulder and wrapped a woolen scarf to protect my ears from the cold. At night I slept on a mat overlaid with a blanket, and covered myself with a couple of sheets.

The sky outside was clear and cloudless. The constellations shone down upon us with an extraordinary brightness. Before setting out for the Himālaya, a friend in Navsāri had introduced me to the heavenly bodies. The stars above had become my good friends, including the real bright ones that were not intimidated even by a full moon. I turned my eyes in their direction.

Then I heard them speak to me :

What are you worried about, friend? We are surprised you call this alien territory! And, what do you mean you have nobody here? We, your friends, are here with you just the way we were at home. If you wait a little while, even more of us will be rising from behind that mountain. You forgot us, didn't you? But, did you also forget the One that created you and created us? What happened to all the talk about the eternal Om chant, and of holy texts like The Geetā? Aren't you the one that used to recite and believe:

> *The mind is the cause of man's bondage and his final release*[48].
> *Nobody is nobody's friend, nobody is nobody's foe.*
> *The soul is its brother, as it is its own enemy.*

What did the river tell you this very morning? What were your thoughts when you saw that mountain? Did the koojo

47 Khes: A rectangular piece of cloth, folded lengthwise and kept on one shoulder.
48 Khes: A rectangular piece of cloth, folded lengthwise and kept on one shoulder.

flower's great service to the world not influence you at all? Was the holy sight of Mount Nandādevi completely wasted on you? Wake up, friend! Get rid of this wretched weakness in your heart; remove these negative thoughts from your mind!

My doubts that the renunciation and the inner peace I sought did not exist in the Himālaya completely disappeared. The external world and my internal being had jelled in perfect harmony. With my mind at complete peace with itself, sleep came easily.

Morning came and we moved on. Now the going was all downhill. We had to descend as far as we had climbed the day before. The Romans could not have been more unhappy to lose their whole empire as I was then. All that hard work that went into our climb, to undo all that now! We had also learned another lesson about trekking in the Himālaya. Going uphill is certainly very tiring, but that fatigue is only short-lived. A steep downhill walk is another story. It is far more strenuous, and it affects every joint in the body. My reaction to that experience was : I would not mind climbing all the way up to heaven. But, o Scribe of Fortune, please do not – for heaven's sake, do not – punish me by ordaining such downhill climbs ever!

This was another beautiful stretch. Expanses of huge Chir Pine and deodar cedar trees – similar to our [Mahārāshtra's] Jungli Saru trees – cast a beautiful shade on the entire vista. The real fun came when one slipped on the dry pine needles that covered the path; it was difficult to decide whether to laugh or to cry!

Apparently, there was some agricultural activity in this area. We passed a small village where a few farmers were busy sowing seeds for the next harvest. There was absolutely no wind blowing, and a couple of the men were using a cloth to fan themselves.

Strewn along the path were some big flowers – pine cones -- from the chir trees. These cones were larger than coconuts. Although their petals were harder than bāwal wood, these cones were beautiful in shape. From their bases, countless finger-sized petals sprang out like a fountain. Unlike most flowers, their colour or smell were nothing to speak of. They looked like wood, and also smelled like wood. These chir and deodar trees belong only here in the Himālaya.

I was overcome by the sight of such an abundance of natural splendour, and I started singing :

Rāmā, O merciful Lord,
Please look upon me with forgiveness,
Rāmā, O merciful Lord.
I know not who I really am,
Nor where in the world I belong;
Although ignorant to this day,
Bragging of wisdom I possessed not;
In my arrogance, stupidly,
I have mistaken this body for my soul;
For absolutely no reason,
I have tormented my mother since my birth;
That thought eats at my core,
Rāmā, O merciful Lord.

Indeed, I had tortured my mother by living a purposeless life. What is more, I had so treated my motherland as well. I felt a loathing for those wasted years of my life. Clueless myself, I used to pretend and brag about my learnedness. I used to lecture people about bringing light into their lives when I myself was in the dark about such things.

I carried on with the hymn :

The ocean of compassion that you are, Lord,
Don't make my lust get the better of me;
Nor let me wander the wilderness of the world,
For the remainder of my life.
Rāmā, O merciful Lord.

The hymnal mood had now taken hold, and I was belting it out at the top of my voice. Then I got to the line:

You are the Supreme Spirit,
Life's only true joy, Lord!
You are the Supreme Spirit,
Life's only true joy, Lord!

Suddenly, the mountain facing me roared back at me:

You are the Supreme Spirit,
Life's only true joy, Lord!

That thunderous reply from the Himālaya seemed like the bodiless voice of heaven. When I forget that I am one with the Supreme Spirit, that is when I become inconsequential, a mere nothing. Look at this Himālaya, so obliviously immersed in that blissful state of true joy! Look at the snow in front of us – it does not sense the difference between winter and summer. Behold this vast expanse of the sky – so serene, so detached! Am I not one with it all?

I was so enraptured by this thought of the non-duality of the Self (Atman) and the Whole (Brahman) that I didn't notice our arrival in Piuda. The town of Piuda is famous for its water. Some tuberculosis patients go to great pains to procure this medicinal water.

We cooked and ate our meal in Piuda, rested for a while, and then moved on. No, not downhill again! My knees protested with spasms of pain and rudely brought me back to my mortal mindset. Slowing down, I again returned to watching the natural beauty around me.

The mountainside farms of this Himālayan region are very interesting to watch. On hills that are wide and not too steep, the farmers work on terraced fields that have steps six to ten feet wide. These narrow strips of land are hand-cultivated to grow grains. These terraced farms remind one of stepped river-ghāts.

The downhill stretch ended, and we came to a hanging bridge known as the Lodhiyā bridge. The bridge provided a nice view of the rocks in the river below. The river's flow had polished the rocks into beautiful shapes. The whirling eddies in the river made those rocks go round and dug holes in the bottom. The rocks whirling in these pits were indeed a sight to behold!

I also saw a snake under that bridge. The only reason I mention this here is that in our two to three thousand-mile trek through the

dense Himālayan forests and a variety of terrains, we saw only two snakes. This was one, the other was near Gangotri.

Again, we started going uphill. We saw a mountain city in the distance and I couldn't decide whether that was Almorā or Muktesar. It was almost evening when we finally arrived on the outskirts of Almorā and saw a chungighar – an Octroi[49] checkpoint.

We also saw a 'cart road' ahead. In the Himālayan region, these cart-paths are considered to be the epitome of modernisation. The mountain people here show the same awe and enthusiasm for their cart roads that we would display in talking about a marble-paved thoroughfare in an Emperor's metropolis.

A Muslim cemetery was located nearby. Its milk-white tombs did not seem to clash with the wooded mountain surroundings. As a rule, the Muslims do seem to take pains to preserve nature's beauty. At dusk, those graves gave the appearance of a herd of cows sitting there in leisurely fashion and chewing cud after a day of grazing.

We got through that day's thirty-seven mile trek without a problem; but at the end, we got lost. Leaving the road, walking through residential yards, and stomping through garbage dumps, we finally arrived in Almorā's central market area and its cobblestoned streets. There, after asking for directions to the Hill Boys' School, we reached my friend's house.

He was not home, probably out for a walk. A boy named Harakhdev emerged from the house. He invited us in : "Welcome, welcome. Please come in and sit on this cot here. I am Swāmi's student. He has stepped out, but should be back soon. He had told us to expect Kākā[50]-ji's arrival. May I ask which one of you is Kākāji?"

Shortly, Swāmi [Ānand] arrived. He looked nothing like the Swāmi I had known in Vadodarā. Sporting a long beard, his long hair in a ponytail, a long white tunic topped by a light orange woolen

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49 Octroi: Levy imposed by certain local governments on goods entering their jurisdiction.

50 Kākā : Uncle. The author was lovingly addressed as Kākā. 'Ji' is the suffix used to show respect.

scarf around his neck and a long pointed walking stick in his hand, this stately figure approached me. We exchanged affectionate embraces; Buwā actually wept. I noticed that Swāmi had difficulty conversing in Marāthi, and had to struggle to keep Hindi words from encroaching into his sentences.

I have no recollection of what we had for dinner, how late we sat and talked, or what time we finally got to bed. One thing that I do clearly remember is, Swāmi in those days was on a strict - milk only – diet. So much so, that he did not even drink water.

I slept so soundly that it felt like I had entered the state of absolute nothingness.

13

Almorā

If one can think of the Himālaya as a giant tree, Almorā would be a nest for humans built on one of its branches. The dry air of Almorā is its big attraction and, during the months of April through October, it draws many tuberculosis patients from far and wide. These people breathe the cool gusts of air blowing through the majestic and tall chir pines, and drink water from a brook named Rāninaulā. In those months, no matter where you ventured, you were bound to see a group of these patients walking, panting, and trying to fill their lungs with life-giving air. The contrast between these pale-looking subjects of their royal malady, and the lush and beautiful Almorā environment is as striking as that between total freedom and total dependence.

Almorā is the district seat and the capital of the Kumāon Division [of the United Provinces[51]]. There is a British Court and an Army cantonment located here as well as a college run by Christian missionaries who have established a big presence here. The 'haven-ly' city of Nainitāl being only 37 miles from here, Almorā has escaped the British stampede.

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51 The United Provinces: A province in British India; present-day states of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarākhand.

We awoke the next morning and went for a walk. It was summertime there, and yet it was colder than a winter morning back home. In the surrounding valleys, the snow white clouds hung low, sleeping their lazy sleep. The sky above was absolutely cloudless.

In the north, the Sun's early rays seemed to make Mt. Nandādevi's snow-capped peak sparkle like a golden dome. Afar, in places where direct sunlight was yet to reach, the rich red hue still visible would have put the red glow of daybreak to shame. The Himālayan realm has mountain peaks aplenty, but Nandādevi's beauty is so exquisite that even the Himālaya seems to be proud of it. Perhaps that is why, like an attendant hovering around to emphasize the importance of his master, the Nandākotā peak stood close by.

Who am I to even attempt to describe the beauty of Nandādevi? It is better that I provide the description of this goddess as written by the ancient sage Mārkandeya.

> *The goddess glitters so bright like gold,*
> *Clad in her woven-gold apparel,*
> *Skin aglow with a golden hue, and*
> *Resplendent in her gold jewelry.*

The sage's belief in the worship of this goddess is so strong that he says:

The one who sings praises of,
Worships and cogitates about
Nandā, this future daughter of Nand,
He will conquer the three worlds.

We found it fitting to start that first walk in the direction of Mt. Nandādevi. The Himālaya is home to many deities whose shrines are scattered all over its expanse. Four of them – Shāi Devi, Dhoorā Devi, Sitoli Devi and Pātāl Devi – are located around Almorā, as if defending it from attacks from all directions.

The leaders of Hindu society were obviously gifted with an astonishing vision. They found a way to associate religion with every facet of human life. Military strategists would clearly see that if the town of Almorā were to remain independent, they would need to retain control of these four outlying checkpoints. Now look at how the religious leaders posed this situation to the people. 'We are blessed to have these venerable and freedom-giving goddesses reside in these four corners. We must protect their temples and maintain their sanctity. If we did that, they are sure to grant us our wishes and liberate us.' The liberation here meant independence from external influences.

And history has seen the fruit of the advice of these sages materialise over and over again. Whenever external invasion was threatened, all the young warriors gathered at these four strategically located temples. With those under control, the enemy dared not venture into Almorā and touch even a twig of its chir and cedar trees.

We proceeded towards Askot to visit the chir forests. On the way, we saw a prison built on a small hill. Swāmi told me that the famous Bengali leader Ashwini Kumar Datta had been incarcerated there. Crossing the chir forest, we came to a hill called Baldhauti. It is said that the British Government had considered this as a possible

location for the city of Shimlā. When Swāmi Vivekānand returned from his U.S. tour, he had chosen to establish his Adwaita Āshram here. But, the story went, the day he filed his request for land with the government, the local Commissioner quietly allotted that parcel of land to Christian missionaries. A settlement for the converted Christian hill people – pahādis – stands there today.

Harakhdev commented, "Kākāji, can you believe how smart these missionaries are? They convert the locals to Christianity and then relocate them to a different state. Likewise, they bring people converted in another state to settle them here. The purpose of these moves is the to sever the converts' relationship with the local society. Also, those that have left are soon forgotten and the local people will be less likely to hold a grudge against the missionaries for these conversions. We lose count of how many of our people convert and leave the state, and we see the people transplanted here and begin to despise the state they come from." Needless to say, I found this learned analysis from Harakhdev quite amusing.

Next, we descended towards the Pātāl Devi shrine. It was almost 7:30 in the morning, and as we went downhill, the lazily hanging clouds were forcing their eyes open like some sleepy children headed for school in the icy cold Northern mountains.

The Pātāl Devi shrine is as convenient a location for the sādhus as there can be. For one thing, it is a very secluded place. It has this beautiful brook flowing through it. And, being in a low valley, the location is protected from the bone-chilling mountain winds. On the shrine's side of the mountain, there is this lone tree that is so big that it can be seen even from the far away mountains. The Pātāl Devi shrine enjoys the same prominence in this region that Tānāji's valley at Sinhagad[52] occupies in Mahārāshtra.

From there, we climbed out of the Pātāl Devi valley and returned to our residence. I was so hungry that I could have eaten soft pebbles and, without a doubt, would have digested them!

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52 Tānāji, Sinhagad : Tānāji Mālusare, Chhatrapati Shivāji's general who, at the cost of his life, retook the fort later named Sinhagad (the Lion Fort) after him.

A Nepali bhisti (water carrier) had kept water ready, and we bathed with that. The exhaustion was soon all gone, and we were raring to go ten more miles. We had just finished our morning rites when Harakhdev arrived with our food. Among other things, he had brought a sweet dish made of flour from a wild seed called ogal.

That afternoon we went to meet Shri Hari Rām Pānde, an attorney and the administrator of The Hill Boys' School. Mr. Pande was a gentleman of culture. After the routine exchange of courtesies, he sought my advice on whether the school should seek financial grants from the government.

I said, "It will be wise to not accept any money from the government at all. For a small amount of money, we lose our autonomy forever. And once the desire to please the Government inspector sets in, we stop paying attention to what is good for the community. The government would have only one consideration, 'your money, our control'."

Mr. Pānde loved that last phrase of mine, and decided to drop the idea of seeking a government grant.

Changing the subject, Mr. Pānde asked me something with utmost politeness. He said, "You gentlemen seem to have renounced your social ties and move about like sādhus. Would it not be better to take up social work instead? Do the sādhus do anything but roam around and be a burden on the society?"

How was he to know that I was possessed by the demon of 'social work' far worse than he, and that my very reason for going to the Himālaya was to exorcize that demon? By rights, a social worker must be qualified to be of service to society. The greatest service that some of these unqualified social workers can perform is to stop wreaking havoc on society in the name of their 'service'. There is a genuine fear that social work will become a profession, a trade, here just as it has in Europe. An English barrister, at one time, was considered to be a social worker without any selfish motivation. Today, that same barrister has turned into a leech that sucks its client's blood.

I asked the honorable attorney, "You are trying to perform social service here. Has it not been your experience that your job could be a lot easier and done better if some of these troublemakers stopped meddling with your work?"

His reply was quick. "Oh yes, I encounter that in every phase of my work every day. All my energy goes into overcoming the objections raised by these inane people. That is what eventually drives us into losing all hopes of accomplishing anything."

I said, "Then surely you appreciate our giving you a free hand in this matter by our staying out of social work. I myself am of the belief that spiritual development and social work are not mutually exclusive. For the sake of argument, however, let us accept that there is a conflict between the two. I still say that it is every person's duty to work on one's spiritual advancement, and that the same cannot be said about social work. On the other hand, serving society requires much skill and ability. It is an exercise that requires careful balance. In performing service to society, one must watch out for one's own moral decline, and must also make sure that it does not make society dependent and lifeless. If these ideals are not properly practised, there is a risk that good will be stifled and evil will prosper."

Mr. Pānde did not respond to this although it is possible that he found my argument logical. He switched to another topic.

He said, "You need to tell your 'plains' people that if they want to come here to the mountains for treatment of their tuberculosis, it is in their interest to do so in its early stages. Some people arrive here too late in the game, and then, unable to withstand the sharp climate here, they needlessly succumb to the disease. Please do me a favor and convey this message to the down-country folks back home."

I thought I had lost all my interest in books, but my greedy eyes kept returning to the mammoth volumes of Shabdakalpadrum [A classic Sanskrit dictionary] in Mr. Pānde's collection.

On our way back from that visit, we stopped at the residence of a Bengali gentleman named Āshābābu, a follower of the Brāhmo Samāj[53] movement. We discussed Vedānta, Tantra, Shakti Poojā and Brāhmo religious beliefs at length.

In the evening, we went to the Granite Hill. It offered a majestic and beautiful panoramic view of the surroundings. Nandādevi was in her golden yellow evening attire, and seemed to be giving her blessings to the departing twilight. Soon, the stars came out twinkling. Cygnus, the Celestial Swan, swam in the Milky Way. Many other gods joined in and majestically sailed in that heavenly stream. Feeling purified and blessed, we slowly made our way back to Swāmi's residence.

The bhisti was anxiously awaiting Swāmi's return for his Geetā lesson from him. I was overcome with joy to see the servant of the morning turn into a beloved student in the evening. Shortly after that, they were joined by the eternal optimist, the tailor. This man had destroyed his life in gambling. Swāmi's influence had instilled a growing sense of renunciation in him. I suggested to Swāmi that he give that evening's talk on the sloka Api Chetsudurāchāro from the Geetā.

A sinner though in the past,
Now my single-minded devotee :
Treat him as you would the righteous,
For he's on the right path.

When Swāmi explained the meaning of this Sanskrit verse in Hindi, the good tailor got all choked up. He said, "No, Swāmiji, I am not pure yet. I still feel the temptation much too often; the old sin still encroaches on my heart."

I was thinking to myself: our self-righteous preachers are busy running after 'offerings' from their affluent customers. Who, then,

53 The original text reads 'Prārthanā Samāj' but the author most likely meant 'Brāhmo Samāj'.

would bring religion to these poor folk? Who would provide solace when they need it? Preachers have branded the lowly of our society as 'untouchables'. In the process, the preachers have themselves become untouchables. Moreover, they have destroyed the Hindu religion's creed of uplifting the downtrodden. This is no longer the land of Lord Rāma who embraced Guhak and Shabari.[54]

Deep in these thoughts, I laid down on my bed. The gusts of wind outside seemed to punctuate my thinking.

54 Guhak, Shabari: Rāmāyana characters of the Shudra castes that Lord Rāma treated with affection.

14

Khākhibāwā

Almost anyone returning from the Himālaya is invariably asked: "Did you get to meet a real sādhu-ascetic there?" I do not understand what people are thinking when they ask such a question. Do they really believe that the Himālaya grows sādhus as it does trees? Many sādhus tour the Himālaya as transients, just as I did. There indeed are some sādhus that have made the Himālaya their home, in the same way that some expert hoteliers have also set up their businesses there.

But that is not the kind of sādhu people ask about. They see such sādhus everyday – like the ones that come to their door begging for food. The sādhus they have in their minds are the omniscient ones, ones who can perform miracles, the great souls that don't need to eat to live! The holy man whose touch can lift your soul to eternal freedom, provide the key to unbelievable fortunes, or – at the very least – can hand you a magical potion for some incurable disease! Some people interested in political affairs even ask, "Did you ask any Himālayan sādhu about what lies ahead for India?"

I have one short answer to such questions: I did not go there to look for sādhus of any kind. I did receive all the advice I cared to hear, but was determined to pursue my spiritual goals by myself. One feels shame in living a life of permanent dependence on others,

living on handouts from them. Likewise, the very desire to seek a boon from some sādhu's hard-earned spiritual knowledge and powers for one's own prosperity, also smacks of spiritual poverty. It is certainly desirable that we feel the purity of his heart when we see such a holy man, that his control of desires develops within us, that his faith in God becomes contagious as it were and inspires us the same way, that we have the strength to make the same commitment for our spiritual progress. But the very thought of material gain from such contact, to hope for long-term happiness for ourselves – all without making any effort of our own – seems contemptible to me.

There are vegetable shoppers that habitually demand a couple of extra potatoes or green peppers after the vendor has weighed and priced their purchase. There are people that claim to serve their country, but refuse to make sacrifices unless they were given key assignments directly related to the freedom of the country. Some believe they can get the British to leave by talking them to death. And finally, there are people who touch the feet of an ascetic, expecting a share of the holy man's spiritual qualities to flow into them like electric current. All these people suffer from moral bankruptcy. What good is moksha – the final deliverance of one's soul – if it is attained without working towards it? How can you even call it moksha?

Our people seem to have some strange notions about the sādhus. Many believe a sādhu to be a living herb or a mantra with magical qualities. Some, on the other hand, think a sādhu to be nothing more than a cheat, a fraud and a parasite living on handouts, and lazing away in a temple or a mosque. This latter impression of the sādhus comes from the fact that they perform no social services nor do they earn their living.

One patriotic person even expressed this opinion to me: why not round up all these sādhus, train them to become a fighting force and then use them to fight the British? It is common knowledge that these sādhus number at over five million. Now, how could the

learned economists among us countenance seeing all this national energy go to waste? The worry about what to do with this five-million-strong sādhu force is making some of these learned folks lose sleep!

The vision that torments me is this. All that the great big majority of these sādhus believe is: this world and the life in it are both meaningless; a piece of bread and two loincloths are one's only needs; so shun everything else, spend your time praising the Lord and in introspection. Now imagine putting them in khaki uniforms, arming them with bayonet-attached rifles and ammunition belts around their waists, and having them march around in formations. Is that image a good portrayal of Hinduism's glory?

Nobody would even suggest that the institution of sādhus represents anything close to an ideal. Khākhibāwā (to be introduced later) said that time re-shapes the behavior of its yogis. Sādhus do not grow on trees nor do they fall from the sky. They are the products of the society they live in. Why does it surprise members of our society to see their own faults reflected in the sādhus? In order to reform the sādhus, society needs to reform itself – meaning, each of its members needs to reform himself or herself.

We have this tendency to lump all sādhus together and judge them as one stereotypical group. Is there anyone that can claim to have lived among them and having rationally examined them? In my opinion, some of these sādhus display a stronger moral fibre, greater compassion for all life, and more industry than they are given credit for. Their understanding of the world around them is deeper than can be learned from all the books in your library.

One early morning we went for a walk to Granite Hill. Sitting under a deodar cedar tree, we talked about Emerson's 'Circles'.[55] Suddenly, we noticed a small fortress-like structure almost obscured

55 Circles: Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous essay from his 1841 publication Essays: First Series.

by the clouds. I asked Swami what that island-like thing was; a temple or an akhādā – a hangout for sādhus perhaps?

Swāmi said, "That is Khākhibāwā's Khagamarā fort that we are going to visit this afternoon. Khākhibāwā is a real saint and I visit him quite often. Every Ekādasi[56] night, they sing hymns all night long over there. A Bengali sādhu comes to those hymn sessions. This sādhu is a big devotee, and also an extremely good singer."

As scheduled, we went to pay our respects to the Khākhibāwā that afternoon. Leaving the Almorā trail, we descended to a rivulet, drank its sweet water, and then climbed the Khagamarā hill to reach the sanctuary.

The Bāwās plan their estates in a unique and noteworthy manner. Quite differently from the blindly fashion-imitating city dwellers, they design their layouts with much thought given to functionality. Everything fits, is in good proportion and has an almost poetic appeal to it. Their buildings demonstrate how beautiful a facility can be without any luxurious trappings.

Khākhibāwā himself lived in an octagon-shaped cabin. Its roof was constructed of long wooden planks that had been turned ugly gray on top by the rain and snow, and on the underside with smoke from inside. A big pyre burned in the centre of the cabin. A few long steel tongs and a couple of tridents stood stuck in embers. On a vast wooden board, exuding a majestic aura, sat the impressive frame of Khākhibāwā. He was surrounded by a throng of his followers from the adjoining mountain communities. Water in a small urn was being warmed at the edge of the pyre.

We entered the cabin. Bowing our heads to Khākhibāwā in respect, we sat down. He extended a warm welcome to us. Swāmi introduced Buwā and me to him.

When Khākhibāwā heard that I was from Belgaum, he perked up and asked, "From Belgaum or Shāhapur?" That amazed me. Belgaum and Shāhapur are neighboring towns, with not even

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56 Ekādasi: The eleventh or the twenty-sixth day of the Hindu lunar month.

a mile separating the two. How did this sādhu from the Himālaya know the difference?

"I am from Shāhapur," I said.

"Your Shāhapur lies within Sāngli borders, not in British territory. The Mārwāri community had started building a temple to Lord Bālāji over there some time ago. Did they ever complete it?"

I brought him up to date on the situation there. Then he wanted to know what I had done in my life, and the places I had visited. I had traveled wide; but no matter what village or town I named, he asked and talked about each of them in detail, as if he was born and raised there.

Then it was Buwā's turn. Buwā was asked about the particular branch of Rāmdāsi Sampradāy that he belonged to, his particular sub-group, and more. It only took a few minutes for us to see that Khākhibāwā knew more about India's geography and religious history than was contained in the volumes of the *Imperial Gazetteer of India*! What is more, none of that knowledge came from any school or college or from a membership to the Royal Asiatic Society! When he realised that we had reached the limits of our own knowledge, he stopped asking questions so as not to embarrass us any further.

We told him that we were on a pilgrimage to the holy shrines at Gangotri, Jamanotri, Kedārnāth, Badrināth and more; and that Swāmi wanted to visit Kailās. Khākhibāwā immediately launched on a detailed description of all those shrines! When he noticed how bewildered we were, he picked up a wooden board and a dried lump of white clay. In a few seconds, he had a rough map sketched out for us. The map showed four alternative routes to reach Badrināth.

He said, "If you want to minimise travel on foot, and maximise rail travel, this is the way you'd want to go. This other route has better availability of food. This third route will get you there in the shortest possible time; but if you choose this route, make sure you carry plenty of coins. Your paper money will not work because the poor people there will not be able to make change for you."

He called the fourth alternative his personal favorite, because it passed through woods, and provided an opportunity to enjoy nature's abundant beauty. That route provided virtually total solitude with at least forty miles separating the few pockets of human population.

I asked him, "Sir, when did you last visit Badrinārāyan?" He replied, "In all, I've been there seventeen different times."

I knew Swāmi Ānand wanted to go to Kailās, so I asked Khākhibāwā, "And Kailās? You must have been there too!" He said, "Yes, eight times." And he started describing the way to Kailās as though he was actually looking at it. He then told us about a sādhu named Morapankhi Bāwā who visited Kailās every year.

We asked him about other pious men residing in the surrounding areas. He, in turn, talked at length about the climate in different parts of India, the regional diets there, his own experience with the beliefs and ways of life in those regions. He spoke very highly of the faith and religious practices of Gujarat. He had specifically enjoyed the loving welcome he had received in Mahārāshtra. He complained about the general filth and indifference for the cleanliness of lakes and ponds in Bengal. He also mentioned the specifics of the poor management of major temples in the South, such as the one in Rāmeshwar.

He then offered us tea. Tea in the Himālaya is not any Lipton tea; it is tea grown right there. It is also brewed in quite a different manner. People here claim that this tea is very effective in combating the brutal Himālayan cold. When we declined the offer of tea, Khākhibāwā asked an attendant to serve us penda (a milk-based sweet) from a basket that sat on one side.

I told him I had given up sugar. He said, "My sugar is not the factory purified sugar. I get it made specially in Kanpur every year." (I have since learned that Rājā Lalitāprasād, a feudal king, had the sugar custom-made in Kanpur and then caravanned up to this mountain location annually.)

I said I had made a pledge not to consume sugar for six years, and begged his forgiveness. But, he was not to be denied that

easily; dried dates and almonds appeared almost instantly for me, and our talk continued.

Khākhibāwā picked up the small urn of hot water, but sprinkled a few drops into the fire as an offering before drinking from it. This perplexed me a bit. Swāmi [Ānand] explained, "Before consuming any food or drink himself, Khākhibāwā will offer it to the fire first."

Khākhibāwā said, "We make bāti[57] and eat it just once a day, in the afternoon."

I thought to myself, 'So the pendās, almonds and dates – all these goodies are only for the guests! Kudos to this great sādhu!'

Khākhibāwā was clad in a loincloth held in place by a thick hemp rope tied around his waist. The loincloth couldn't have been more than six inches wide. His entire body was covered with ash. His beard and moustache were long and had turned red from the constant exposure to the hot pyre.

Our discussion turned to the subject of religious preaching of the modern-day sādhus.

"Some people with college education turn sādhus. Then they write books in English, go around lecturing people, teach them about serving society..." Khākhibāwā couldn't contain his laughter.

Then he vented his frustration, "What do you English-speaking sādhus do for the poor? What do you do to soothe the pain of those that are suffering?"

And then, as his blank gaze turned to the dharmashāla across the courtyard, his words gained intensity. "Those big shots want to do nothing but go around lecturing everybody! Not one of them has it in him to be another Vivekānand; all the idiots can do is translate someone else's words! Think about the Lord, do some penance, meditate. Feed the hungry if you can, and otherwise mind your own business. Is that too much to ask of a sādhu?"

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57 Bāti: Unleavened whole wheat bread, resembling a bun but with a thick and crispy crust.

When Swāmi asked him if he was planning to travel to Badrināth this year, Khākhibāwā pointed to the big cracks in the soles of his feet. "God has punished me with these. He must have seen my obsession for the pilgrimage, and decided to do this to my feet to make me settle down in one place. I would need to use burlap foot-coverings to walk that far now."

It will be impossible to put a value on the quiet social services performed by Khākhibāwā in Khagamarā. He provided medicines to the ailing. Being worldly wise and yet detached himself, he provided valuable counsel to the troubled, and to confused family men. Nobody went hungry or thirsty in Khagamarā. His wise counsel settled family feuds that courts were unable to resolve.

Being a yogi, his ultimate desire was to spend his final moments in padmāsana – the lotus position – and to become one with the Universe. He had renounced his worldly ties and had settled down into retirement. But, even in retirement, he had found a wondrous way to actively do good for society and yet stay completely detached in the way lily leaves remain dry even in water.

Modern theologians, statesmen, those in social service and the economists – all these people who criticise the institution of sādhus – should first make an unbiased and honest attempt to study the lives of its members. Just the fact that they have found and demonstrated a way of life that promotes excellent health in our country, partially justifies their cost to society. We think of the worldly businessmen that accumulate wealth by catering to the baser instincts of people (and then leave a litter of worthless children behind them) as our benefactors. But, we think of the sādhus as nothing but freeloaders. What a wonderful irony!

Just look at how expensive our institutions of social services are, how high the salaries of their managers are! How much effort, cost. and half-truths go into the reports they produce? On top of all that, how many instances of fraudulent monetary practices at those institutions do we hear about? On the other hand, the organizations run by sādhus have no names; they do not produce reports; they

do not have 'Life Members' and 'Patrons.' By and large, these institutions run at a minimum possible cost, with every penny accounted for.

On the cultural side, India's incomparable folk literature has stayed alive – and will continue to live – thanks to the efforts of these sādhus. Nowhere else in the world will you find another so sophisticated, inexpensive and reliable arrangement for preservation, propagation and continued evolution of the religious culture.

Many scholars have written books postulating the existence of India's national unity, citing historical and geographical facts to support such claims. Much credit for creating that unity, however, must be given to the institution of sādhus. In the good old days, any benevolent king would be sure to meet and pay his respects to a great sādhu visiting his capital. He would seek information about the happenings in distant lands and its people from the sādhu. The sādhu, in turn, would make sure to visit the king before leaving his city, offer his blessings and give the king a frank appraisal of his observations in the kingdom. This way the poorest of the poor could get their gripes to their ruler through a decidedly unbiased advisor. This served as an extremely effective check on the king's administrative officers. Any king desirous of making a name for himself was thus eager to govern in line with the sādhu's idea of right and wrong ways to rule.

When a sādhu travelled through rural areas, he would set up residence under a tree and light his dhooni – the pyre that burned around the clock. The village children would gather around him and learn about the life and geography of India. The local merchants would learn about commerce; the youth with soldierly ambitions would learn where their heroism would be appreciated; the old women would add to their knowledge of herbal medicines; the sick would find cures for their ailments; and, every so often, an old temple or charitable inn would be renovated. Very much like a butterfly going from flower to flower, helping pollinate the trees,

a sādhu moves from place to place, and acts as a cross pollinator of culture across the nation and around the world.

As the educated and cultured members of our society became mere homebodies, their appetite for a disciplined approach to life waned. Society became lazy, promiscuous and greedy. It supported the institution of sādhus, not for its true benefits, but only to score religious points and gain positive entries in the celestial 'book of accounts.' This moral decline also manifested itself in the sādhu population, and fewer had the virtues of true sādhus. And now, on the advice of some outsiders, we are preparing to annihilate that whole institution.

To begin with, we allowed many of the noblest of our social institutions to languish and rot. Today, instead of trying to reverse that decline, we want to kill those good institutions and embrace some crude and uncultured ways of life. We are very proud to declare that ancient cultures like Greece, Rome and Egypt are all dead but our Indian culture lives on. We should remember that Indian culture can stay alive only if it can maintain and improve its ancient, and yet ever-fresh, institutions. The moment we demolish those institutions, Indian culture will enter its cultural graveyard.

The tumult of such thoughts raging in my mind, I did not notice who was with us, who said what, or when we got back from the Khagamarā hill. The Himālayan air is perfectly suited for meditation, but two things counter the desire to meditate very strongly: one is the cold; the second, hunger. On that day, both joined forces to attack me. We practically ran to the kitchen to fend them both off.

15

Padambori

Even among the true sādhus, there are two groups with their distinct ideologies about life. There are those like our Khākhibāwā – who beat us up for engaging in nothing but lecturing people – and who have distributed food to the poor, supplied medicine to the ailing and served society in many ways.

Then there are others who consider both those attitudes – preaching as well as service to others – as unhealthy for a sādhu. That group believes a sādhu must remain steadfast in his personal quest [for spiritual advancement], and avoid attachment of any kind, including doing good deeds for others. Their motto is: It is better to forsake the desire to procure money even for charitable purposes. Is it not better to avoid getting mud on one's hands at all, rather than having to wash the mud off later?

It would be wrong to assume that this latter group is apathetic toward societal needs or is devoid of any compassion. They simply say: "People don't properly understand the nature of active involvement. Activity of any kind connotes a bond; more benevolent the activity, the stronger is the bond it creates – because that bond does not seem like a bond at all and, therefore, is that much more difficult to get out of. No, you cannot serve the world with activity alone.

On the other hand, avoiding the tendency to sermonize is also being humane. If you are too engrossed in your activism, you fail to notice how completely useless most of your preaching is. The Creator must have intended that if someone needs your advice, he or she will come to you. So, when you set yourself up as a social worker, don't you see that you are casting a huge doubt in the Creator's design of the self-sustaining universe?

When circumstance requires so, do the best possible job of providing whatever advice you must offer, or the service that you need to provide; and then, just walk away. You may want to engage in social service to fine-tune your instincts of love, compassion and such. But those are just the means to cleanse your mind and soul. Please be mindful of the fact that these practices form bonds; they do not help you liberate yourself from your desires."

We had the great fortune to meet a sādhu of such disposition. Let me narrate that incident.

We stayed in Almorā for about fifteen days. In those fifteen days, we visited quite a few places of interest, met many good people and communed with nature. We met the person who had played host to Swāmi Vivekānand when the great man lived here, and learned much about Swāmiji from him. But, this is not the time nor the place for narration of all that.

As the old adage goes, 'a sādhu belongs on the road'; also, a slow-paced travelogue gets boring to read. We, too, were anxious to get going with our Uttarākhand pilgrimage. So we decided on a convenient time and set off. Our plan was to return from Almorā to Kāthgodām, take a train to Haridwār and then commence our foot journey from there. On the way to Kāthgodām, we wanted to make one stop near the town of Muktesar and pay our respects to a sādhu named Sombārgiri Bābā.

Sombārgiri lived in a place called Padambori. Its location was nothing short of poetic. It was surrounded on three sides by three big mountains, and a river flowed through the middle. The mountains were so close and so tall that if you sat on the riverbank

and looked up, the sky seemed to lose its vastness and appeared like a triangular cloth canopy.

We reached Padambori in the evening. On the way, we had reminisced about the vagabond boy Harakhdev, the *Geeta*-studying water carrier, the good attorney Harirām Pānde, the emotional tailor, and the postmaster gone crazy at having a son born at an advanced age. Suddenly, the horse-attendant (a horse carried our luggage) announced, "There, the little temple you see across the river… that is where the Mahārāj lives."

We went to a dharmashālā first, unloaded our belongings there and then left to see Bābāji.

Bābāji had this rule that anyone wanting to meet with him had to clean up first. This was easily facilitated because his place was right on the river. We washed our hands and feet, then waded over to a big rock in the middle of the stream, sat on it and offered our evening prayers. Then we crossed over to the other bank and went to offer our respects to Bābāji.

Bābāji projected the image of nature – pure and simple. He had the briefest of *langotis* on him and nothing else. His hair was long, and thin tresses of hair played on his forehead and over his eyes. He held a chalam – a smoking pipe made of clay – in one hand.

We approached him and with folded hands paid our affectionate respects. He returned our gesture with equal humility, went and sat on the low wall of the shrine and invited us to sit with him. We deemed it inappropriate to sit at the same level as him, and sat on a step below him. Bābāji didn't like this inequity and immediately came down to sit on the step with us. So we moved to sit on a mat on the floor. Not to be outdone, Bābāji sat down on bare floor. The only thing we could do was to remove the mat and sit on the floor with him. He simply said "Friends, what can I say except that I see the Divine in you! I have been waiting for you since this morning. You are Brahmā, Vishnu and Mahesh[58] themselves here to grant me an audience!"

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58 Brahmā, Vishnu and Mahesh: The Hindu Holy Trinity comprising The Creator, The Maintainer and the Destroyer.

Sombārgiri did not know us at all. He certainly did not know that we were coming for a visit. Yet, he had been telling everyone around since that morning that he was expecting some people to arrive to see him! One local farmer later told us that, afternoon onwards, Bābāji kept getting up from his seat to look into the distance, and then returning, dejected, to sit back down. Though clearly disappointed, he would say, "But, of course they are going to be here today!"

Upon learning all that, we told him, "Bābāji, had our horse-tender not been late, we would have arrived much earlier."

Then the talk turned to the matter of our pilgrimage. Having travelled a lot in his life, he – just like Khākhibāwā – was a living encyclopedia of the Indian subcontinent. No matter which part of India you mentioned, he would embark upon a detailed description of that region. He spoke such pure grammatical Hindi that it was impossible to tell which part of India he was originally from.

Both Khākhibāwā and Sombārgiri ate just once a day; neither cared for anything more than a langoti thong. But, they were poles apart in everything else. Their lives and ideals were entirely different. Khākhibāwā built and lived in his own monastery. Sombārgiri never stayed put in any one place for long. He believed that staying in one place tended to create attachments with that place and its local issues. Khākhibāwā stocked up on herbal medicines for the ailing; he fed any traveller that went to his place. Sombārgiri was a practitioner of total renunciation – he would neither take anything from anyone nor give anyone anything. He held this firm belief that people like him (sādhus) should stay away from such transactions.

When we visited Khākhibāwā, he had first offered us some sweets and later, upon learning that I did not consume anything with sugar, had served dry fruit to me. Here, Sombārgiri gave us each a piece of his bāti[59]. It is not everyday that one gets to eat sanctified food like that. It tasted so good that I don't remember ever

59 Bāti: Whole-grain wheat bread, un-leavened and baked in a charcoal grill.

having eaten bread like that anywhere else. Sombārgiri Bāwā had gone out that morning to the nearby villages and solicited fresh wheat flour from some kind farmers. Then he had mixed pure ghee and clean spring water into it, and baked the bātis himself over kindlings he had gathered from the forest. There is no way to describe its purity or its taste.

Sombārgiri believed in sharing his own simple food with his guests; Khākhibāwā's attitude was to provide reasonable comforts for his guests. Khākhibāwā consumed sugar specially manufactured for him; we saw Sombārgiri verbally beating up on a sweet-maker for using imported sugar.

The very mention of Khākhibāwā's name evoked an extremely reverent reaction from Sombārgiri Bāwā. He folded his hands, bowed his head and said, "He is a great sādhu, an ardent tapasvin[60], and does much for the benefit of the people." After a pause, he continued, "Yes, he is a Rājayogi, a king who involves himself in a lot of activities. In contrast, I am a loner. If people start coming to see me here, I would run away. My sole possessions are this vyāghracharma[61] and this kamandalu water pot. And, even that much worldly attachment feels burdensome to me."

Then he proceeded to tell us about many sādhus he knew, talked about their activities and, thereby, indirectly informed us of the variety of ideals followed by different sādhus.

I asked, "You give religious discourses. As a teacher, I too teach my students about religion. The difference is, I tell them what I have learned from books but you speak from experience. Do you have any words of advice for me?"

He said, "I know that you teach Bhagwadgeetā to your students, explain its meaning to them. That is not a good idea. Even grown-ups are not capable of understanding the principles of Nivrutti

60 Tapasvin: An ascetic, practitioner of austerities as a means to spiritual advancement

61 Vyāghracharm: Sitting mat made of one-piece tiger skin.

– total surrender – taught in Geetā; how could children even begin to understand it?

> *Comprehend one must of action, and of bad action,*
> *As also of no action, for deep lies the crux of action.*
> *One that perceives bad in doing, and good in inaction,*
> *Wise is he among men, perfect in his work, doer of all.*

"Now, how are you going to explain the meaning of such verses to the young? Before you cloud their young minds with the concept of 'desireless action', train them properly about result-oriented but dutiful action. Your Vedānta turns the young into imbeciles, destroys their desire for purposeful action. They are unable to achieve their goals, and then spend all their time in meaningless talk. Please save your Geetā teachings only for a proper audience."

I felt I had been given a new direction and thought hard about that advice. Finally, I asked, "Does that mean we should stop teaching the young about the Geetā completely?"

He said, "No, I am not saying that at all. Have them memorize verses from the Geetā, for sure. But, for God's sake, don't try to initiate them into the practice of Nivrutti – into leaving everything in God's hands."

After that, we picked his brains about our planned trek through the Uttarākhand. The more we heard him talk and learned how commanding his knowledge was, our respect for him grew stronger. That session continued late into the night. Finally, we paid our respects to him and returned to the dharmashālā. The place was so crowded that had we not laid out our beddings earlier, we would not have found room to stretch out.

We rose early in the morning and went back to pay our respects and to take our leave from the great man. We arrived just as the Bāwāji was finishing up on his morning meditation.

A mongoose walked by soon after we started talking. Bāwāji said, "We are looking at the Divine."

Kiran Doshi
Kirti Doshi
9 Harrowgate Drive
Cherry Hill, NJ 08003-1912

He offered us tea. I told him I did not drink tea. He said, "This is not the tea you drink back home. This is Himālayan tea, without any sugar or milk. Have a little bit; it will help you in your travels." He broke an almond into three pieces and gave us each a piece as prasāda – food blessed by having been offered to the Divine first. He also added some strange herb (not bhāng, the narcotic) to the tea. We drank the consecrated tea with much devotion, offered our respects to the Bāwāji and sought his leave.

He patted us on the shoulders with much affection and said, "The Lord is all around us."

16

Slaughter of Cows

Padambori and Muktesar – the two places couldn't be more dissimilar! They seemed like opposite extremes on the morality line.

As we saw earlier, Padambori is in the valley formed by three mountains and located on the bank of the river Pārvati. It has a shrine dedicated to Lord Shiva.

Muktesar was our next stop. Its elevation must be no less than 7,000 feet above sea level. We discussed the origin of the name Muktesar. I said it must have come from Mukteeshwar or Muktikeshwar. Buwā opined, "There must have been a motee-like lake giving it the name Moteesar. Or perhaps it was Mouktikeshwar." Bhattji, who had accompanied us from Almorā, said, "Most of these names are really simple; it is linguists like you who give such beautiful twists to them!"

We really don't know what the original name of the town must have been. There is no lake here, only the Mukteshwar Mahādev (Shiva) shrine at the top of the mountain with an adjacent Bhairavghāti. The climb from Padambori to Muktesar is like ascending from earth to heaven. To say that Muktesar's natural beauty is heavenly is not an exaggeration. On the contrary, it quite possibly is an understatement. But – even in the Himālaya, these

days, there is an occasion for 'but' – this place has degenerated to a state worse than that of hell. Heaven below and hell above – what figure of speech would the linguists and rhetoricians call that?

Muktesar is home to a Government Bacteriological Institute. A gruesome slaughter of cows goes on within the walls of this Institute. Why? Is it to provide beef to European soldiers? No, it is not. In addition to feeding the carnivorous hunger of the cruel [foreigners], the poor cows and oxen of India now have the added responsibility of becoming medicine for various diseases.

The British [in India] noticed that many of their horses were dying of the highly infectious Rinderpest disease. The cure they found involved sucking blood out of oxen, making an anti-Rinderpest serum from the blood and then injecting the horses with it. Where would they find oxen for such a purpose but in India?

I heard from someone there that the blood of forty thousand oxen had been extracted to produce this serum, which was then distributed around the world. The process used to extract blood is cruel and extremely inhumane, to say the least. First, the oxen are fed very well and fattened up. Then, a vein is cut and a bucket or two of blood is collected from each ox. The ox is then bandaged up and allowed to recover from the blood loss. After a few days, the process is repeated and more blood is collected. The third time, all the blood is taken out because the animal would not have much left in it for any later extractions!

It was evening by the time we reached Muktesar. We spent the night at a gentleman's home. Although he had arranged for our dinner with great enthusiasm, we found the rice to be undercooked. Our conversation revealed that people in the mountains prefer their rice that way. Had we not worked up a mountainous appetite that day, our teeth would have refused to expend the effort to chew that rice. The accompanying vegetable was very tasty though.

Our host's living-room walls had their lower parts constructed of wood, which slanted inwards to form a cushion-like support for

the back. Given the cold climate, such wooden support facilitates sitting comfortably against the wall.

The following day we visited the Bacteriological Institute. Our host gave us the guided tour. I listened to him but my mind was elsewhere. The images of cows being bled to death simply wouldn't go away.

A big bell hung from a turret at the top of a hill. I asked what the bell was for. I was told, "If there is a fire in the woods, an accident of some sort, or in any other emergency, that bell is rung to gather people there." Can there be a calamity greater than 40,000 bovine offspring being killed? I felt like going up on the turret and ringing that bell to summon the 220 million Hindus here. And if they turned a deaf ear on me, I wanted the 330 million Hindu gods that roam around the Himālaya invisibly to listen to the heart-wrenching cries of the mother cows of those forty thousand victims.

That thought was still swirling around in my mind when we reached the Mukteshwar Mahādev temple, and my mind found some peace there. Not far from the shrine is the Bhairavghāti. A vertical cliff that starts right from the top of a mountain is called Bhairavghāti. In keeping with a tradition from the olden days that is still followed by members of the Bhairav sect, people jump off the cliff while chanting Bhairav's name. They believe that ending one's life like that leads to moksha – salvation of the soul from the cycles of rebirth – and is not a sin.

Today's laws treat this belief as wrong, but psychologists can easily understand the thinking behind it. It is one thing to be so disappointed with life as to take the cowardly way out and commit suicide. It is quite different to witness nature's vast and heavenly beauty, to experience the irresistible urge to become one with it, to lose the desire to be bound to one's mortal body and jump off to gain that unity with the Infinite. The end result may be the same; we may call all ends of life as death. However, there is a difference. Sometimes death is an epilogue to the drama of life, even the final lines of a triumphant end.

Hope springs eternal in us humans. People's hopes have no limits; in fact, there is no way all our hopes can be realized. There are limits to how rich our lives can be. Life is quite poor when judged against the hopes of a person. But, death can be rich enough to satisfy all one's hopes. What life fails to achieve, death can attain. In life, there are countless disappointments; death knows of none.

The cow-slaughter was very much on my mind even as we reached the top of Bhairavghāti. What good were the deaths of all those oxen? From one perspective, the death of the oxen represented the ultimate in self-sacrifice for the general good. India's cattle giving their lives to save the world's horses, mules and other animals from the plague is no ordinary act of piety. However, is it a voluntary sacrifice? Today, my India is making limitless sacrifices. The British Empire lives today because of India's support. India makes mortal sacrifices so that others may live, but gets no moral credit for it. What is the value of a sacrifice when made in weakness and in bad judgment? It is for naught, here or in afterlife.

Buwā rang the bell of the tiny temple, signalling it was time for us to return.

17

The Dharmashālā

From Muktesar we backtracked our way to Kāthgodām on the same old road, took a fond look at Bhimtāl and descended from the heavenly Himālayan mountain back into the mortal world. The sight of now-familiar places created feelings quite different from before. Earlier, while going [from Kāthgodām] to Almorā, we had seen the Himālaya for the first time. Never before had we seen such vastness or such majestic heights. On our return trip, it all seemed familiar, though no less interesting. On the way up, the unprecedented had awed us. This time, the familiar interested us. How could we not feel gratitude for the brooks and the trees that had welcomed us on our way up? I hugged the familiar trees and drank water from the brooks with affection – not thirst. I felt it would be ungrateful of us not to stop for a minute or two at the bridges where we had rested our tired feet on the way up.

Swāmi and I struck up a discussion about Sanskrit literature. I said, "This dense multitude of skyscraping trees reminds me of Bānabhatta's literary style. Every bit is full of unmatched beauty and lofty heights, yet its excessiveness seems to obscure that beauty."

Then the talk turned to the matter of Sanskrit poets and state support for them. Kālidāsa was a court poet, whereas Bhavabhooti was a people's poet. Kālidāsa flies high in the Pushpak aircraft or

else rides as Megh and gets a bird's view of India from the skies. In contrast, Bhavabhooti dons valkals – clothing made from barks of trees – and makes his way on foot slowly through the Dandakāranya forest with Rāma, Lakshmana and Seetā. That is the difference between their writing styles. Bhavabhooti's verses move at the slow and deliberate pace of a prince that would 'make the earth bow under him.' Kālidāsa's descriptive phrases are like Shakuntalā's expression – 'not openly erotic, nor totally veiled.'

If the natural beauty of the surrounding woods reminded me of those Sanskrit poets, the thought of people-supported poets brought to mind Bilhan[62] who had ungraciously bad-mouthed court-supported poets. But, I instantly realized, that interest in such poetic extravagance was not becoming of spiritual seekers who had renounced their worldly desires. Buwā quoted, "The thirsty can hardly enjoy partaking of poetry."

It was midday, and Surya, the sun-god, seemed to have opened one more of his thousand eyes. Far below us, the Rāmgangā river made its thunderous passage through the canyon, but its water was about as accessible to us as the after-monsoon rain!

Swāmi quipped, "The beautiful forests around us probably remind you of Bānabhatta's Kādambari; as for me, all I can think of, listening to Rāmgangā's howling down there, is the clamor of those twenty or so locomotives at Colaba railway station!"

The mention of locomotives reminded me that now that we had returned from the nature's lap into the human world, it wouldn't do to forget those fire-chariots' schedule. I looked at my pocket-watch and screamed, "Buwā, run… or we won't make it to Kāthgodām in time!"

We ran and huffed our way to the station… only to see the train winking its taillights at us and whistling in mirth as it pulled out of the station! We had missed the train by a whisker.

Missing the train was not the end of the world, but witnessing our porter's disappointment saddened us. Poor fellow had run ahead,

62 Bilhan: The eleventh century Kashmiri poet noted for his satirical works.

carrying our baggage so that we wouldn't be delayed in boarding the train. We all laughed about it. The porter said, "How about this? It is still early in the day. Instead of just sitting here, we can walk to Haldwāni and spend the night there."

Haldwāni is the next station over from Kāthgodām and serves as a minor commercial center. We walked the five miles to Haldwāni. We ate, drank, and then reigned supreme over our little kingdom in a dream world.

However, before that foray into the dream world began, I had the occasion to first visit the fantasy world.

We found some space in the dharmashālā and started cooking our meals. You meet all sorts of people at a dharmashālā and get to hear the gossip from all corners of the world. Bāwās come here, as do merchants and government officers; feudal landowners, totally unaware of changed times and still living in the past, come here riding their horses in worn-out old saddles; the young who don't even know there *was* a past come here; the beggars, and worse yet, the police, come here. And yogurt vendors – whose own outlook on life has gone sour like stale yogurt, in having to deal with such a motley group of people – set up shop here.

The evening hours of six to eight is the time more or less reserved for quarreling at a dharmashālā. Until eight pm, the travellers quarrel with other travellers, and with their porters; buyers quarrel with shopkeepers, and the shopkeeper's wife takes it out on her children; policemen go after beggars; the dogs keep their fights to themselves. As the clock strikes eight, the hungry have sated their hunger, the fire in choolās (makeshift stoves) is quenched. Most of the oil lamps are out by then because the shopkeeper providing the earthen lamp, oil, and a wick for it – all for one paisā - would ration the amount of oil to last only that long! And, with that, out goes all the discord; civility returns to the conversation. Once the eight o'clock truce is declared, the universal dharmashālā doctrine requires peaceful behaviour from everybody!

It is then that the travellers really start communicating. The bāwās relate their experiences from the world over – facts and fiction mixed with a good dose of their opinions and criticism. With children present, a telling of the Akbar-Birbal[63] stories is a must. The women like to dwell on their pilgrimages, and – especially if they happen to be from the same town – turn to gossiping about the ever-fierce mothers-in-law vis-a-vis daughters-in-law conflicts.

When at a dharmashālā, women from any part of India feel comfortable talking to others from other provinces. Apparently, the language differences seem to bother only the well-educated! Women – no matter what their geographic origin – are mostly old fashioned. Their thinking, feelings, ideals, traditions and superstitions are pretty much the same. With such mental concord, why would they find it difficult to understand each other? When two Englishmen meet, the first thing they talk about is the weather. When two women meet, each invariably wants to know how many children the other has, where her daughters have been given in marriage, whether the girls are happy or not, whether the other woman's mother-in-law has visited these holy places or not, and such. The local shopkeeper's wife will join in with her own sob story – in full detail and complete with tears flowing – even when this is the 5,612th recounting! Generally, her effort does not go to waste. The compassionate travellers – some of them victims of cheating by the subject shopkeeper – relate to the woman's woes, feeling vindicated to hear that the same evil person has also mistreated her, and feel good about giving her some money before they depart.

The shopkeepers have built their own firm opinions about different Indian provinces. They express these views quite as freely as the bāwās do, perhaps because there is not a single statute in our Penal Code that applies to bāwās or shopkeepers.

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63 Akbar-Birbal stories: The stories about the Moghul Emperor challenging Birbal – one of the nine renowned 'jewels' of his court – with tricky puzzles, and the legendary courtier's witty solutions to those.

If the citizens of princely states (not under direct British rule) are at a dharmashālā, all aspects of such states are discussed. The Royal court's intrigue, conspiracies and machinations are described 'for your ears only.' Being good citizens, they are not about to betray their Royal family by spreading gossip and badmouthing them to just *any one*! 'You,' however, seem like a decent, honourable person. Why would they have any problem telling 'you' such things?

Well, we had the 'good' fortune to talk to a patriotic, immensely proud Sanātani, an orthodox Hindu, merchant. He ran a Gurukul – a traditional residential school where the *Guru* lived with his kula (extended family of students) near the town of Hastināpur. But wait, the term Gurukul is used by the Āryasamajis; his Sanātani institution had to be called something better – Rishikul, meaning, a *Rishi* (a sage) and his kula! Only later, when I was in Haridwār, did I learn that these various names referred to essentially the same thing. Vaishnavas have their Āchāryakul, the bāwās name them Sādhu-āshram, and the family priests call theirs Pandākumār Mahāvidyālaya.

Anyway, our Hastināpur merchant said, "We established our Rishikul a year ago, but haven't found a good teacher yet. A Brāhmin runs the place now, but he is no match for the boys we have. We need an English-speaking sādhu like you for the job. People will be impressed, and our fund-raising will go a lot easier. If you join us, we will have the benefit of your company and spiritual guidance every day, and those crazy Āryasamājis' mouths will be shut like that of a rat that has swallowed some ginger. That was precisely the reason we had started this Rishikul."

He continued, "What happened was that a couple of Āryasamāji propagandists showed up in our town and proceeded to criticize the Sanātani beliefs. We didn't have any local scholar that could counter their blasphemy. So, we sent an urgent telegram to Haridwār and summoned three Sanātani preachers who fought those guys tooth and nail. The debate went on for three days…"

I interrupted, "What was the subject of their debate?"

He said, "Look, what do I know about such things? I don't know any Sanskrit at all! In the end, those two Āryasamājis had no more to say; we had won the debate! The other side, of course, claimed that they had won. You tell me, would their expert debaters have shut up if they had won?"

The fact was not lost on him that I had listened to his description of that epic battle without much interest. Perhaps a bit dejected, he asked me, "You are not an Āryasamāji, I hope?"

I replied, "No, sir! I happen to be a diehard Sanātani."

"Then please do come to Hastināpur. We will build you a nice cottage to live in, get a special cook for you, arrange for English newspapers. We ourselves will benefit immensely from your discourses."

I said, "I would have come if I did not have other plans. As it happens, I want to visit all the holy Uttarākhand shrines, and then return home."

I didn't have the heart to tell him my real thoughts. Even if I had told him, would he have understood them?

The next day we boarded our train and left. After experiencing a walk in the Himālaya, a train journey becomes boring and almost intolerable. The three of us who were accustomed to walking at least a hundred yards apart, were now crammed together on half a bench of a rail compartment. Instead of listening to the soothing sound of trees rustling around us, our ears were assaulted by the clamour of our fellow passengers.

We travelled to Luksar by way of Bareilly, changed to another train, and reached Haridwār at midnight.

18

The Rāmakrishna Mission, Haridwār

It is said that going on a holy pilgrimage earns one punya [positive points in one's accumulated karma], but the amount of punya depends on how you do it. If you complete your pilgrimage on foot, you get the maximum punya. If you are carried on someone's shoulders in a palanquin, you earn only half the amount. The pilgrim that rides a beast of burden [or a vehicle pulled by it] gets very little or no punya.

In today's context, I will add my own opinion that, if a pilgrim rides an automobile or a rail train, the punya surely would turn negative and the pilgrimage would amount to actually committing a sin. Rail travel is not conducive to any finer feelings or religious emotions. What is more, undertaking rail travel today is the surest way to kill one's self-respect. We pay the fare, buy something similar to a postage sticker, affix it to ourselves like to a parcel, and stack ourselves inside a coach compartment. The only difference between a parcel and us is, the parcel is tossed out upon reaching its destination, whereas we let ourselves out.

Travelling aboard a train, we are not moving towards our future. Rather, it is the world outside that seems to be wistfully rushing back towards a better past. If chance brings two humans together somewhere, and they experience no tenderness for each other, how

can you call that place anything but hell? Only the evil would run a rail service all the way to a holy place of pilgrimage. Getting any punya out of pilgrimage by train is as unlikely as the demon Gayāsur granting moksha to you. In that vein, the state of Gujarat has already desecrated the holy shrines at Dākor and Sidhpur [by constructing rail lines going through both towns]. Now it is engaged in the mega project to similarly desecrate Dwārakā, the holiest of the Western shrines in India. We are indeed living in kaliyug[64] – the age of immorality. Rabindranath Tagore has aptly said: 'Kaliyug is actually the era of trickery.'

Haridwār is the portal of the river Gangā's release. The legend goes that the river Bhāgirathi (the source stream for the river Gangā) emerged from its source at Gangotri and got trapped in Lord Mahādev's dreadlocks (a metaphor for the Himālayan jungles, perhaps!). It struggles to get through the mountains and hills up there and slowly makes its way south.

The congestion and hardships suffered by the Bhāgirathi Gangā in navigating this mountainous region are not different from those experienced by travellers standing in crowded lines to purchase their train tickets. Imagine a huge procession of people emerging from a crowded narrow street and entering a wide-open square, breathing sighs of relief and scattering at will in all directions. That pretty much describes what happens to the revered Gangā near Haridwār. When little calves are let out of their enclosed spaces in a dairy farm, they express their joy of freedom by just running around. In the same manner, the Gangā, freed from the rigors of mountain travel near Haridwār, runs in multiple streams, each stream frolicking with that same childlike joy. Neel Dhārā – the main stream of Gangā – appears a bit more dignified. But, that is the mock dignity of a child having donned his grandfather's turban, strutting around with a walking-stick. As a matter of fact, Neel Dhārā is hardly capable of maintaining any semblance of dignity.

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64 Kaliyug: Hindu scriptures break the timeline down into cycles of Satya, Tretā, Dwāpar and Kali in a descending order of moral fibre among humans.

Just as Haridwār is where the Gangā leaves the mountains and enters the plains, it is also the portal where pilgrims start their ascent into the mountains for their Himālayan pilgrimage. In spite of being accessible by rail, Haridwār has remained a relatively clean place of pilgrimage. The immense revenues earned by the local municipality may have contributed to that cleanliness, but the real reason must be that Haridwār is the abode of sādhus. No matter how much other 'dirt' these bāwās and sanyasis may carry, there is no doubt about their practising good hygiene.

Our train reached Haridwār at 2 AM. We knew nobody there, and having no desire to be the guests of any Pandā, we had written ahead to the Rāmakrishna Service Mission in the nearby town of Kankhal, and requested accommodations there. How were we to find our way from the station to the Mission that late at night? We hired a porter, agreed to pay him four annas (a quarter rupee) and set off in the dark.

When the porter heard some English words in our conversation, he said, "Oh! Sir, you are gentlemen. I know English, sir! I am gentleman coolie, sir! I have 10 years live in Dehradun, sir!" We burst out laughing. He continued his barrage of English in spite of our rudeness in carrying on in Hindi. But the cat was out of the bag! He knew that we understood English, and insisted on using 'English' only.

When we arrived at the Mission, our 'gentleman coolie' said, "Give me four anna coin, sir. Copper is very heavy, sir.' [The four anna coin was the smallest and the lightest of Indian coins at the time.] Swāmi blurted out in English, 'Really! Heavier than the luggage that you carried here?"

We didn't want to wake anyone up at 2:30 in the morning. So we stretched out on one of the porches of the Mission's hospital. Early in the morning, before anyone was up, we slunk around like thieves and managed to take care of our bodily needs. We washed up and went to pay our respects to Swāmi Kalyānānandji, the

Mission's head. He welcomed us with much affection and showed us where to put our luggage.

Swāmi Vivekānanda travelled all over the Indian subcontinent and later throughout the world. As a result of that experience, he came to the realisation that the new age called for a change in the way the sādhus pursued moksha. The best path for them to follow was to serve the living – the hungry, the poor, the disabled and the ailing. He preached that such service should be done not out of pity for those unfortunates, but with a sense of gratitude for being given the opportunity to serve. Following that maxim, Swāmiji's fellow-students and his own disciples have established these hospitals, and service missions in major shrine cities like Prayāg, Puri, Haridwār and Vrindāvan.

The Sevāshram (service mission) at Haridwār – like Brahmā's universe – was created out of nothing. Swāmi Swarupānand of the Māyāvati Mission scraped together 200 rupees from somewhere. Swāmi Kalyānānand took that money and arrived in Haridwār. Back then, he spoke no Hindi, knew nothing about [Āyurvedic] medicine, was not – and is still not – blessed with any speaking skill. Armed with an unshakable faith and a wooden case filled with homeopathic medicines, he set up 'shop' in a small hut. In time, the 'business' caught on. An affluent businessman donated 10,000 rupees towards the cost of a small building.

Kalyānānand studied Āyurvedic medicine, found success in his work and it prospered tremendously. A Marathi acolyte named Nishchayānand came in to assist him. Nishchayānand – a disciple of Swāmi Vivekānanda – speaks very poor Marathi but knows Bengali really well. He is a man of few words as well. He works from morning to night without stopping and does not know the meaning of fatigue. The only thing he finds tiresome is answering people's questions. His Guru had given him the very appropriate name of Nishchayānand – meaning someone happily determined in his dedication.

Hundreds of sick – sādhus and family-people alike – come to the Mission every day. The seriously ill get admitted to the hospital. There is an isolated facility to house TB patients. In treating his patients and making home visits, Kalyānānand gives no priority to the rich over the poor.

The day we arrived at the Mission, two dignitaries were also there on a visit. One was Swāmi Brahmānanda, at the time the head of the Worldwide Rāmakrishna Mission organization and a favourite disciple of Rāmakrishna Paramahamsa. I felt incredibly privileged to meet him. The other person was Swāmi Shivānanda, the head of Rāmakrishna Advaita Āshram in Vārānasi and another disciple of Shri Rāmakrishna. From them, we learned a lot about Shri Rāmakrishna, Swāmi Vivekānanda and the Rāmakrishna Mission in general.

I had read the writings of Swāmi Vivekānanda in my college days. Those articles had cured me of my atheistic fever and rid me of the egotistic disbelief of religious tenets. I had accepted Rāmakrishna Paramahamsa as a manifestation of the Supreme in our age. Given that, was it any surprise that I was thrilled to meet two people who had been in such close contact with Shri Rāmakrishna?

I asked for a private meeting with Swami Brahmānanda, and received much comfort from that meet. He was perhaps disappointed that I did not enroll in the Mission, but considered me as one of his own. I myself felt like a vagabond who had found a home. I told him of my intense desire for a Himālayan pilgrimage.

He provided his blessings, and we started our preparations for what was sure to be an arduous pilgrimage.

19

Preparations

We wanted to visit the holy shrine at Badrināth. But we knew little about how far Badrināth was from Haridwār, the travel route to take, how many way-points there were, what equipment and provisions we should keep with us, where to find a porter to carry our stuff and what to pay him. We needed to gather all that information, and to learn what sightseeing to do along the way.

A dam has been built on the Gangā near Kankhal. The famous [Upper] Gangā Canal[65] starts here and flows all the way to Kanpur.

The canal is intersected by the river Solani near the city of Roorkee. The engineers of that day built an aqueduct and raised the canal flow to get beyond the Solani. I will not attempt to describe that *Bhagirath* task[66] in this work!

We went across the dam to an island called Dāmpār where we were told a Swāmi Keshavānand may be able to help us with the planning of our trip. Keshavānand was not there but we saw a sanyāsi seated on a raised platform around a peepal tree. His physical shape and sallow complexion clearly indicated his fondness for food. He was obviously at rest, a long piece of cloth wrapped around his knees and waist forming a rocking easy chair. It is said that one can rest in such a 'chair' and talk for hours without any discomfort.

We didn't get much information from him. What we did get were tidbits about the dangerous terrain, the practically impassable path, and the dire warning that most people who take the path never return. After all that, seeing how determined we were to proceed, he quoted an Urdu couplet that basically said, 'Once you dare accept a challenge, it is better to die than to give in.'

Thanking him for that invaluable piece of advice, we turned and headed back to the marketplace of Haridwār. I had forsaken the use of sewn apparel, like jackets and shirts, so I bought a Kānpuri shawl and a couple of woollen scarves. We also bought one lightweight frying pan, an aluminum saucepan with a cover, a saucer, a good-sized brass jug and a small metal dinner plate. I suddenly thought that it would be nice to take some wax-cloth along for the rainy season. In the days that followed, I was very thankful for that timely thought. No matter how much rain fell or how drenched we got in our travels, wrapping my rolled up clothing and the bedding with

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65 The Gangā Canal: An irrigation canal completed in 1854 by the East India Company.

66 Bhagirath task : Impossible task, referring to the King Bhagirath of mythology who brought the Gangā from heaven to Earth.

that waterproof cloth gave me a dry bed at night. I already had a bottle of quinine with me. Candles, matches, soap, plenty of small change of coins and a solid bamboo staff for Buwā rounded out our preparedness for the foot pilgrimage.

We learned that there was a hangout for porters near Bhimgodā, just outside of Haridwār. We went there and struck a deal with a couple of them. Our plan was to spend a day visiting Kankhal and Haridwār and then to set off on our trek. We were anxious to get going, but I am sure my readers are not in that much of a hurry. They will want me to describe Haridwār and Kankhal in some detail. So I must try to do that at leisure.

20

The Holy Portal

Taken together, Haridwār, Kankhal and Jwālāpur constitute a complete world of their own. Haridwār is the shrine city where pilgrims flock. Jwālāpur is the abode of the pandās – the priests. Kankhal is the permanent camp of the various sanyāsi groups. The three places are so close together, yet so different in character. All three have huge dharmashālās, free food centres and religious schools. Of the three, Haridwār and Kankhal are ancient places and the Hindu scriptures have rigorously stressed their religious significance.

A famous Āryasamāji gurukul — a residential school where the ancient Hindu teacher–student traditions are followed – is situated across the river and a short distance from Kankhal. A similar Rishikul run by the Sanātanis is located between Haridwār and Jwālāpur. And, in Jwālāpur itself, the Jwālāpur Gurukul Mahāvidyālaya [offering middle school through a college degree program] is run by the Sanātanis but operates in the Āryasamāji gurukul style!

The objective of all three of these institutions is to prepare staunchly religious and orthodox preachers to propagate the institution's beliefs. All three believe that effective preaching [in today's world] requires comprehensive command of the English language and worldly knowledge. After visiting the three institutions,

I came away with the strong impression that the students had far less religious fanaticism than the founders and the faculty of their respective institutions. The students appeared far more patriotic than dogmatic. The love of their country seemed to be more of an influence than a fervour for the Hindu religion. These are obviously my impressions as a traveller just passing through. Later, much after the conclusion of my pilgrimage, I came in greater contact with these institutions. There is much to say about them, but this travelogue is not the appropriate medium for that.

Another institution that attracted my attention was the Munimandal Āshram located somewhere between the Haridwār railway station and the Rishikul. It is not a school but a theological research institution. It has an extensive collection of theological references that provides the perfect setup for one seeking solitude for in-depth study and contemplation of theological matters.

That institution owns a hand-scribed copy of the *Harivansh* tome. The text of the volume is as neat as 'granules of pearl.' One or more miniature paintings adorn every page of that beautiful volume. The paintings are done in exquisite Jaipur style, each painting framed by beautiful patterns of vines, and captioned underneath. Although the captioning is in Marāthi, the style of the script is not traditional Marāthi. That leads me to believe that this incomparable work must have been commissioned by a Marātha leader and executed by highly skilled Jaipuri artists. I had seen paintings in Vadodarā, Jaipur and Bānkipur's Khudābaksh Library collections. I had also seen the murals depicting the Rāmāyana episodes painted on the walls of the royal palace of Banāras. Nonetheless, the miniatures in this copy of 'Harivansh' gave me immense pleasure.

I felt great sadness thinking about all the world-class objects of Indian art in exile throughout the world and rotting there. Many priceless old volumes have gone to various London and Berlin museums, countless paintings and sculptures grace a Boston museum. When I thought of the anguish of those objects of Indian

art at being so ridiculed and ignored, the poet Keshavsut's words slipped out of my mouth:

'Oh Lord,' she sobbed,
'Leave at least that much for me.'

That attracted the attention of the sādhu librarian in attendance. He asked me what I had just said. I said, "Nothing, Swāmiji. All I pray for is that gems such as this remain in our country. The *Harivansh* copy you have here should be cared for as much as Mother Yashodā cared for the child Krishna."

What we have talked about so far were all somewhat modernized institutions. But, the old fashioned akhādās, caves, and larger kothis – sādhus' residences – abound as well. Sikh dharamsālās, buildings of the Udāsi sect of Sikhism, akhādās of Dasanāmi followers of Ādi Shankarāchārya and such are always present in shrine cities like Haridwār.

The place I especially wanted to see was the Annakshetra – the free meal center [set up by Queen Ahalyābāi Holkar]. Ahalyābāi symbolized the religious devotion and charitable expertise of Mahārāshtra. Ahalyābāi meant Maharashtra's respect for womanhood. This venerable queen served her subjects like a mother, spent her life like an ascetic, protected her kingdom with unusual ability, and immortalized her own name by establishing free guesthouses and meals centres in every major shrine city across the Himālaya. Even today, the holy Gangā water is hand-carried from Vārānasi to Rāmeshwar in the South of India – in her name. She did none of that for herself. Legend has it that a Brahmin wrote a book praising her and showed it to her. The saintly woman took that volume, paid the Brahmin for it and … had it sunk in the river!

Buwā asked me who had told me there was an Ahalyābai Annakshetra in Haridwār. I said, "Why would I need to be told? I had a definite feeling that there had to be one here in Haridwār." Then I recounted my childhood memories to Buwā. "I had gone to Gokarna Mahābaleshwar in Karnataka in my very young days.

There was an Ahalyābāi Annakshetra there too. We had stayed at a place close to it. A hungry traveller showed up for lunch late – after the local administrator had already changed out of his 'clean' serving dhoti. Unwilling to dress up again, the administrator had asked me to serve the guest. I was not quite eight years old, and had not been given my Sacred Thread yet, which meant I was 'clean' at all hours of the day. I threw off my clothes, went into the Annakshetra's kitchen, laid out a meal on a big banana leaf and served it to the guest. Then I got dressed and returned to my mother. I asked her whose temple that was. Mother sang me a long song about Ahalyābāi. From that day on, I have revered Ahalyābāi. She was born into a lowly cowherd caste, but even today the most orthodox Brahmins bow before her statue."

I was writing about Haridwār, and got sidetracked to Gokarna. Like a pilgrim moving to a new location every day, we humans have this habit of changing topics at will! A traveller, almost invariably, likes to talk. Go to any akhādā in Haridwār and you will run into sanyāsis gabbing about places near and far. In Jwālāpur, you will meet pandās that have never travelled out of the state but will talk authoritatively about all of India. The difference between the two is that the sanyāsis have no ulterior motive in talking to you, whereas the pandās will not give you the time of day unless they sniff you out as a person of means. In either case, there is no reason to believe there is substance to everything they say.

In the evening, when the sun loses its intensity, tens and even hundreds of thousands of the pilgrims gather at the ghāt on the sacred Gangā. Just like the Chowpatti beach in Mumbai, throngs of people crowd the 'Har-ki-Pauri' in Haridwār. Sādhus, self-styled saints and groups trying to spread the word of God address small groups of people all over the ghāt and sing religious hymns. Peddlers hawk their wares, and women maintain their smiles even as they suffer the beggars and set afloat their offerings of little floral lamps in the sacred river.

This deep-dān – the offering of lamps – is a wonderful metaphor on the hopes and ambitions of women in real life. Countless beings start out in the flow of existence, ride the ups-and-downs of their lives, float in the directions dictated by the winds of Providence and scatter. Some sink right at the beginning; some make it across to the other shore without incidence; some pair up with another being; some shine brightly for a few moments of glory and then set their own boat afire and sink. A few maintain a mild but steady glow, surround it with much love and safely go far, at the same time providing a beacon to guide other lives. Deep-dān symbolises precisely this phenomenon of life.

On one hand, these chains of uncountable lamps are being pulled by the flow of the Divine will. On other, the thousands of temple bells toll, their rhythmic ringing rides on the air and enters the womb of the infinite. And Mother Gangā listens to that music, laughs, plays with the rocks in the riverbed that have collided with each other for ages and have become smooth, pleasing to the eye and peaceful in the process. What a poetic sight! Even the stars in the boundless sky pause for a moment and watch this poetry unfold, stop their own eternal song and listen to these bells, halt their divine dance and behold the beauty of the endless flow of the lamps below. Mother Gangā is perhaps babbling the message, 'The dear pebbles in my stream prove that immigrants from all across the globe can live with tolerance and coexist peacefully in the Indian civilization that I symbolise.'

The moon was setting as we ended our walk along the river and reached Kankhal. Along the way, we saw many huts thatched with hay-mats. I was highly impressed by the construction, simplicity and elegance of these huts. As I have stated before, the sādhus possess excellent taste in the design of their buildings. What is more, they exercise great care in maintaining cleanliness in the surroundings. If you can shed your modernistic revulsion and get close to them, you are sure to recognise their decency, multifaceted knowledge, and tolerance for adversity. Sādhus have the misconception that people

who use eyeglasses and wear hats and socks are all sinners and degenerates. Likewise, the 'civilised' people feel that behind every saffron covering lies a good-for-nothing, lazy cheat. If reverence based strictly on someone's appearance suggests ignorance, a disdain for someone cultivated on the person's external appearance is no less an indication of ignorance.

I was extremely disappointed to learn that a sādhu who spoke English automatically commanded greater prestige. But securing porters to carry our baggage being of greater concern than that, we went towards Bhimgaud the following morning to find one.

21

The Departure

We will never know who the first explorer was to set out from Haridwār and to travel north, along the sacred river looking for Gangotri, the source of Gangā. I have this personal belief that the establishment of shrines at most of the sacred places like Gangotri, Jamanotri, Kedārnāth, Badrināth, Amarnāth, Mānasarovar, Mahābaleshwar, Tryambak is the result of man's natural curiosity to discover where the river waters come from. The Aryan residents of the North Pole set out to discover where the warmth-giving sun rose and set, and eventually spread through all the four [known] continents. It is not at all surprising that the inhabitants of India travelled – with their cattle herds or by themselves – looking for the sources of rivers.

I have stated earlier that a religious pilgrimage could serve a military purpose as well. Our ancient ancestors must have felt that strategically located high – elevation vantage points or a fresh water lake serving the entire population's needs should not be allowed to be controlled by even a benevolent king. Such places would be safer if they became the centres of religious significance, and controlled by the faithful. This, perhaps, was the literal and direct use of the age old maxim 'religion will protect its defenders.' Kedārnāth and Badrināth are on the road that leads to the Niti Pass trade route

to Tibet. This road is covered by snow and remains closed eight months of the year, and opens only for the monsoon months. Peaceful commerce or aggressive attacks are possible only during the monsoon months. Now, if thousands of pilgrims are on the road during those four months, the road gets obvious protection, and commerce can prosper. The same is true of Kailāsh and Mānasarovar. Lipu La Pass and Unta Dhura Pass take us between the Mānasarovar and Rākshas Tāl lakes to Tibetan tradeposts at Gyanima and Gartok. A pilgrim to Kailāsh and Mānasarovar – if he or she doesn't ascend to the blissful afterlife in heaven right from there – is sure to come home with an invaluable Tibetan rug or two along with whatever punya – good karma – from the pilgrimage.

As any puzzle solver knows, all the fun derived from the struggle to solve goes out the window if the solution is already provided with the puzzle. Sadly, that is the case with the Himālayan pilgrimage today. The once-difficult paths have become quite easy today. There was a time when the pilgrims going to Gangotri and Badrināth would distribute their property among their children, would go around saying goodbyes to friends and relatives, and start out like soldiers going off to battles they may not return from. If death did not claim them, it would be due to death's negligence – not their fault. Today, one can send and receive telegrams at Badrināth, and request funds to be sent by money orders. Gangotri and Jamanotri do not yet have these facilities and, therefore, one can still earn some punya there.

We found the Coolies' hangout a bit past Bhimgaud. We needed only one porter, but ran into two brothers. They proposed, "One can easily carry your baggage but two of us will split that among us. As far as you are concerned, you pay for only one porter." Assuming they didn't understand Marāthi, Swāmi said, "That sounds OK to me, Kaka. Let us hire them. We will feed them well on the way

and keep them happy. Where we camp, we will make khichdi for them; around here they consider khichdi better than a feast."

We helped Kairāsing and Bādaru – our new partners – put the baggage on their heads, and we set off, carrying our own luck on our heads. Providence walks with those that walk!

22

On the Road to Rishikesh

We saw the railway tracks to Dehradun snake through the dense woods on our left like a female cobra slithering through tall grass. The joy of having embarked on our long-awaited holy pilgrimage just refused to take hold as long as those rail tracks remained in our view. In a short while, our road decided to shun the rail, turned and crossed a beautiful bridge to enter the woods. We had started out later in the day than planned, and it was midday before we reached Satya Nārāyan Temple [about 6 miles from Haridwar].

This is a nice temple with enchanting marble idols of Lakshmi and Nārāyana (Vishnu). The priest kept staring at us hoping for a monetary offering. Here we were in the temple of the husband of Lakshmi – the Goddess of wealth herself – and this man found our faces more attractive than the Lord's? Of course not! But, he did find the lure of the money in our pockets far stronger than that of the marble Goddess standing there.

We went to the well in the courtyard, washed up and sat down in the temple to rest. Suddenly an ever-fresh song sprang from my lips:

Today is the day, a wonderful day
The day of our greatest fortune;

The day of our great fortune,
O, the day of our great fortune.
Today we have seen the Lord,
The Merciful One that lives in Vaikuntha;
The Merciful Lord of Vaikuntha,
O, the Merciful Lord of Vaikuntha.

That hymn, rendered in a folksy tune but sung in my completely atonal high pitched voice, gathered a few people around me. My voice broke and an embarrassed me walked out of there with my head down.

We moved on from there. We saw a spot alongside a little brook where some people had their cooking fires going. We found a suitable place and started our own fire worship – over an open air wood stove! Buwā was our designated cook because, being a devout Mahārāshtrian Deshastha Brahmin, he would not eat anything cooked by Swāmi or me. That, of course, was a matter of major and permanent convenience for the two of us. Swāmi's job was to find firewood and water, mine to set up and start the cooking fire. Swāmi also did all our shopping as and when needed. To unpack and repack our luggage at every stop was my area of expertise (yes, that too requires some skill!). And, while Buwā did his cooking, Swāmi and I would read something nice to him.

Swāmi had a book of Thoreau's essays. From that, he picked out the one about The Natural Man for today's reading. He took my straw mat, spread that out on the rocky ground and assumed a regal sitting stance on it. Now, how was a mat made from straw going to survive on those rough rocks? That act of cruelty on my beloved mat from someone that was pretending to be a natural man annoyed me no end. I asked him to get off the mat. But, Swāmi turned a deaf ear to my request. I was so angry that I even considered grabbing his leg and pulling him off that mat.

Swāmi was saved by the arrival of a man who seemed mentally unbalanced. This man approached us, took some water from the

brook, rinsed our feet with it, and then mumbled "Today my life has found its meaning, my efforts have borne fruit." Swami gave him some money and sent him on his way.

We finally sat down to eat. Buwā served us our meals with the love a mother would show while serving her children. We ate, rested for a few minutes and then moved on.

Once on the way, Kairāsing – our porter – told us with some seriousness, "We cannot afford to have you walking this slowly. At this rate, even four months will not be enough to finish your trip. The money you have agreed to pay us would all be spent on food alone. What are we going to take home with us?" Little did the poor fellow know that we were going to pick up so much speed in a few days that they were going to have a tough time keeping up with us.

We arrived at Bābā Kāli Kamliwālā's dharmashālā in Rishikesh that evening.

23

The Sādhus' Home

As the story went, a merchant had met with much failure and had lost his heart as a result. With the solace and blessings from a sanyāsi, he had returned to his business and made a fortune. The sanyāsi refused to accept any gift from the grateful merchant but told him, "If you really want to spend the money, do what you can to relieve the hardships suffered by the pilgrims to the Himālayan shrines."

The merchant financed the setting up of major facilities along the Rishikesh to Badrināth route for the pilgrims. The sanyāsi himself undertook to oversee the entire organization and yet took pains to keep himself detached from it. If he took a meal at one of those charitable food centers, he would 'pay' for it by hauling several containers of water into the reservoir. This sanyāsi even authored a tome entitled In Light of Experience without Prejudice. He always wore a black kafni (tunic) made of hand-woven wool and people took to calling him Bābā Kāli Kamliwāle – 'the holy man in a black tunic'.

The Kāli Kamliwālā dharmashālā in Rishikesh was our destination that evening. I had seen dharmashālās – free inns – in Mahārāshtra as well, but – besides a watchman to keep an eye on the property – there was little by way of amenities provided

there. In Punjab, the word 'dharamasālā' has a totally different connotation. There, a dharamsālā is the place where Guru Grantha Sahib – Sikhism's holy scripture – is kept and read. That, in my opinion, is the more appropriate use of the term. In such dharamsālā or [later named] Gurdwārā, a pilgrim or a guest is welcome to stay and get a good meal.

The resident priests and organisers of these [Kāli Kamliwāle] dharmashālās take pains to provide comfort to their guests. I found the hospitality here far more intense than I had expected, and found this first experience to be almost suffocating.

The moment we set foot in the dharmashālā, we were welcomed with smiling faces as if we were invited guests. We were escorted to a room on the upper storey. One man came and set up a lamp; another arrived to ask us what kind of cooking pots, pans and utensils we wanted. Had we been agreeable, we would have received all provisions as well. Unprepared and rather embarrassed by the intensity of that welcome, I just went and sat in a corner.

Swāmi feels quite at home among strangers in strange places. Unlike him, not speaking Hindi was a big handicap for Buwā and me. For that reason, it obviously fell upon Swāmi to do all our food shopping and such. He assumed our leadership, and managed that role quite well throughout our journey. There were times when his zeal caused problems for us. However, in the end, his leadership made for a comfortable and peaceful pilgrimage for all three of us.

Buwā, our designated cook, cooked our meal. The firewood must have been damp and its smoke, like an overbearing mother-in-law, had made Buwā's eyes tear up. We had a filling meal; so, when the chief administrative sanyāsi came around to inquire about our comfort, having authorised Swāmi to answer his questions, I was sound asleep. There were enough pilgrims gathered at the dharmashālā to give it the crowded and noisy ambience of a Third Class waiting room at a railway station. I had no desire to walk around or take in the surroundings.

First thing in the morning, Swāmi reviewed with us all the information he had gathered the night before. He told us about how many dharmashālās and free food establishments there were in Rishikesh, that there was a wooded area named Bor-van with sadhus living in thatched-roof huts, about a Punjabi dharmashālā that was rolling in money, and so on.

When we came back after responding to Nature's call, an attendant was ready with water to wash up. I felt then, and still believe, that people on pilgrimage should not be pampered that much.

I have noticed that the bodily activity of defecation is not considered worthy of even being mentioned in literature, be it ancient Hindu scriptures or contemporary poems and novels. This dharmashālā had every other imaginable amenity, but no provision or facility for this necessary and hygienic need, as if Mother Nature was to provide for the 'nature's call'! I thought to myself, if I ever was a sanyāsi able to bless a down-and-out businessman into becoming a multi-millionaire, I would suggest to him not to build any more dharmashālās. Instead, I would strongly recommend providing clean latrine facilities near every dharmashālā in the country. Not only would he go to heaven in his afterlife for doing this good deed, he would save millions of pilgrims from experiencing living hell every morning.

Apparently, all the land in Rishikesh is the property of Bharat – Lord Rāma's younger brother. If a sādhu wants to erect even a dinky little hut some place, he needs specific permission to do so from the administrators of the Bharat Temple. Well, we paid our respects to the Divine Brother and hit the road again.

Visiting the same place a second time does not have the virgin feeling of the first encounter. I have had the occasion to visit Kāli Kamliwāla dharmashālās numerous times since, but the memories of that first stay are as fresh even today.

We walked enjoying the beauty of wooded hills on one side of the road and the bank of Mother Gangā on the other. In a short

time, we saw the imposing structure of Dhanrājgiri Kothi on our left. The official name of the establishment is Kailāskirti Āshram, but it is known only as Dhanrājgiri Kothi. It is no less than a college for the study of Vedānta, with many learned sanyāsis in residence.

From ancient times, the Gangā bank has been a favorite location for peaceful study and meditation by sanyāsis. Before the advent of free food centres, the sādhus would complete their morning studies, walk 11 miles to Haridwār to seek bhikshā – to go door to door soliciting food. They would then walk the same eleven miles back to their caves here. Their hardship was noticed, and centers were set up in Rishikesh from where food was delivered to sadhus dwelling even in the woods.

Eventually, the arrangement changed whereby the sādhus would go to the annakshetras – the distribution centers – and fetch their own food. Some of these centers ration the food given out, others would provide as much as a sādhu might want. The sick, and the Bengali sādhus were given rice. Some sādhus would pretend to belong to one of those categories just to get rice, the others would happily accept roti – unleavened flat bread – and dāl – lentils – from the annakshetras, go to the riverbank and enjoy their meals over there. The fish in the holy river, of course, own the exclusive rights to all the roti-crust!

The sādhus build very nice huts in the woods of Rishikesh. They fetch hay from the jungle and use some of it to twist into rope. They don't need to go far to gather wood. Plenty of driftwood comes down the river and just needs to be pulled from the water. It takes but a day to put a hut together.

A group of twenty or so huts would usually have a covered platform in the middle, where a learned teacher would give evening discourses on Prasthānatrayi – the essence of all Hindu scriptures contained in the Upanishads, Bhagwadgeetā and Brahma Sutra. Here is where groups of sadhus small and large would get into the many interpretations of Shankarāchārya's principle that 'there is one Universal Truth; this world is but an illusion.'

These discussions are not mere regurgitations of the already digested and accepted interpretations. New doubts and questions come up for debate, new arguments and responses are proposed and countered. The Kumbh Melā, held once every twelve years, becomes the occasion for in depth exchanges of these new angles, adding to the interest in these discussions. This is the mechanism devised by our sādhus to keep Hindu theology alive and strong.

The legend goes that the seventeenth century Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb attacked this Institute with a huge force. In response, the sadhus burned their huts and scattered in the woods and villages around here. How long were the soldiers going to chase after them? Aurangzeb had to accept defeat and return. Three days after the aggressors left, the institute was back to its original working state. How can anyone defeat or enslave those that have renounced everything?

Our next stop was Rāmāshram, a small organisation established by Lālā Baij Nāth of Agra in memory of Swāmi Rāma Tirth[67], that also boasts of a small library. Lālā Baij Nāth was a scholar on Hinduism and a thinker in his own right. I had read his 1905 book *Hinduism, Ancient and Modern* in English. When I heard that Lālāji was at the Āshram, I could not resist meeting him. We met and talked. I got the distinct impression from his remarks that this admirer of Swāmi Rāma Tirth felt he had made a definite contribution in Rāma Tirth's development. I had no reason to doubt the truth in that. He invited us to have lunch. We ate, and – without any consideration of how he would feel about it – even had a nap in his living room. We talked some more, and moved on.

Lālāji was of the firm opinion that the sādhus of the day idled their time away rather than spend it in the study of the sacred Hindu texts. He was obsessed with the idea that if those sadhus were given proper guidance and their energies harnessed, they could better serve the Hindu religion, and thereby play a huge role

67 Swāmi Rāma Tirtha (1873 – 1906): A teacher of the Hindu philosophy of Vedānta.

in the motherland's progress in every field of life. He yearned to gather together a group of educated and dedicated young men in such āshrams, and shape them into many more Swāmi Rāma Tirths. I could clearly sense that he was eyeing us with that intention, but we had no desire to stay in any one place for any length of time, and were anxious to get going.

(I remember meeting this same Lālā Baij Nāth years later in Agra. He had shown me a brand new retreat on the bank of the Yamunā not far from the famous tomb of the Emperor Akbar, and tried to tempt me again with the offer to set me up there. This was a place of a very interesting design. It had one room on a hilltop that was meant to be the library. Below that room was another room which, although in the bowels of the hill, was open to the cool breeze from the Yamunā and the sun on one side. That was the meditation room. A cook's room was to be built nearby. He wanted me to engage in deep study of Sanskrit and English theological tomes, and then to spread the message all over the world.)

As we left the Rāmāshram, the Gangā flowed on our right, down beyond a big rock. I saw some carpenters building bamboo rafts down on the riverbank. Recalling the hardship of starting our cooking fire the night before, I went and asked one of the carpenters, "My good man, can you give us a short piece of bamboo tube?" He gave me two, and that solved Buwā's problem of getting the chulo fire going. Those little blowpipes did that job for us for the rest of our journey. Towards the end, a little slip of Buwā got one of those bamboo pieces partially burnt. Even the remaining half came under someone's foot and broke. I have no recollection of what happened to the other piece. That one case of quick thinking on my part scored me quite a few points in Buwā's and Swāmi's estimation. I believe those positive scores have continued to accumulate to this day.

The next landmark for us was to be the famous bridge named Lakshman Jhoolā. There are four mandirs – temples – named after Rāma and his three brothers, Lakshman, Bharat and Shatrughna,

located between Rishikesh and Lakshman Jhoola. The Rāma Mandir is in the midst of a bazaar and faces a mini tri-river confluence. Bharat, of course – as we have already talked about – owns all the land around here. The temple named for Shatrughna is where the agreements between the pilgrims and the porters mandated by the Tehri rulers get written down. From his temple, Lakshman keeps a watch over the pilgrims crossing the holy river here.

The contract between porters and pilgrims is a hugely important document. A substantial proportion of the populace of the feudal state of Tehri is illiterate. These illiterate porters navigate the formidable jungle paths, literally carrying the pilgrims' belongings on their heads. The government does need to exercise some control over their conduct. On the other hand, there is no guarantee that some pilgrims, hardened by life in a cruel world and unable to change their ways even while trying to atone for their sins at these holy shrines, will not try to cheat the poor porters. Whatever the cause, the fact remains that the Tehri porters will not walk even a step without a contract. The bulk of the pilgrims conclude their four-shrine pilgrimage of Gangotri, Jamanotri, Badrināth and Kedārnāth in Rāmnagar, Almorā or Kāthgodām. But the Tehri porters don't go there. Returning from Badrināth, Tehri's state border is reached in places like Milchoudi or Ganai. The Tehri porters, unsure of getting their deserved dues outside of their own state, refuse to cross the border. The pilgrims have no choice but to hire new porters at Milchoudi.

The current bridge[68] at Lakshman Jhoola is made of steel cables and rods. A philanthropist named Seth Soorajmal financed its construction with the stipulation that no pilgrim would have to pay a toll for using the bridge. Before that, there was a wooden plank bridge to cross the Gangā. Not only was it fatally dangerous to step from one plank to the next, just looking at the forceful flow

68 The bridge that the author refers to was replaced by a newer bridge in 1939.

of the river below was frightening enough to cause imbalance and a fall. Staring at the fast-flowing river water creates the illusion of the bridge rushing in the opposite direction of the flow, very much like the trees that appear to be running back, as seen from a speeding train.

There is no doubt that this philanthropy of the rich man from Calcutta earned him much *punya* — positive *karma*. But let us not forget that the punya earned by pilgrims also diminished along with the difficulty and risk of the pilgrimage. As long as the danger of falling from the plank bridge and drowning existed, the opposite shore with the destination of Swarg Āshram[69] – the heavenly hermitage – seemed very aptly named. The Pāndava king Yudhishthir is said to have travelled to the Himalaya and ascended to heaven accompanied by a dog. Today, any old dog can use this bridge to go to 'heaven'!

The beauty of the Gangā near Lakshman Jhoola is indescribably unique. High cliffs on both banks, the clean and green river flowing with the joy of its newly found freedom and trees big and small gazing down from the mountain top... it is indeed impossible to say which complements which.

Some locations create this incredible impression on one. Every time I cross the Lakshman Jhoolā bridge, some thoughts inevitably cross my mind. This entire Creation is alive with all manner of life forms assumed by the immortal soul; just as the waters of the Gangā have been flowing incessantly for eons, there is no end to the aspects of that Supreme Soul. The rivers and their frolicking fish, the trees and their chirping birds, the grassy meadows and their grazing cattle, and even the human animal that preys on them but still desires to be the true heir to the divine Father... all but different manifestations of the same unity. Crime and sin are only illusions; equality and love are the only truth. These thoughts, for

69 Swarg Āshram: Bābā Kāli Kamliwālā organization's complex of ashrams, stores, etc.

some reason, have dominated my mind every time I have stepped onto this bridge. Buwā knows about these thoughts because I have discussed them with him.

After completing our Himalayan pilgrimage, Buwa and I did return to Lakshman Jhoola and stayed at the Swarg Ashram. At that time, we had heard about this sādhu that lived about two miles from here and constantly repeated the 'soham' chant meaning I am [that]. One day, a hungry tiger pounced on him and yet he kept chanting soham. Soham signifies one-ness with the Universe. Even as he faced death, that sādhu refused to express any anger or fear.

I had heard the popular belief that some of the oldest Hindu scriptures were written at this location. I do not recollect whether that legend referred to Veda Vyāsa – the author of the epic Mahābhārata – or to Ādi Shankarāchārya – the eighth-ninth century theologian.

Bor[70] trees grow in abundance here, and the nearby rice fields are famous in the surrounding states. The Bāsmati rice grown in Tapovan – a village in the hills just above Rishikesh – is so good that not only the rich and poor alike, even gods and ancestors will be tempted to come down to enjoy it.

70 Bor, ber: A popular berry-like fruit, Indian Jujube or Z. Ziziphus jujuba L.

24

Something New Everyday

My mind is overflowing with snapshots of our long Himālayan journey. Unfortunately, those mental pictures have no notes scribbled on them about where and when they are from. Lacking that information, I am unable to arrange them in chronological order. This creates the concern that I may attribute the description of some of these pictures to wrong locations.

At this point, my best solution to this problem is to stick with describing only what I can clearly remember. For a travelogue to be worth its name, the original outline must be factual, before embellishing it with the colours that imagination may provide. Swāmi's series of articles about our pilgrimage, rather than help clarify details, actually add confusion to my already blurred recollections.

A related thought that occurred to me concerned me even more. My mind could not properly recreate the pictures of the journey that we undertook together, even after reading a fellow traveller's description of them. How complete was my translation, of those mental pictures into words, going to be for the readers who have not travelled to those places? If the narrative becomes a mere play of words, then the pleasure derived from it will not be an enjoyment of the beauty of nature. Any joy derived from such word play will

not have the purity and quality that these descriptions deserve. It would be similar to making someone laugh by tickling them. How close can such things get to reality?

But such thoughts merely sadden the writer and readers, and make them lose interest. For that reason, a wise man should keep such thoughts to himself. Just as one should not shed one's private tears in public, one should keep one's disappointments to one's self. Let us leave all that behind us and return to our travels.

Until we reached Lakshman Jhoolā, we were still within the civilised world. We crossed the bridge, avoided the road to Swarg Ashram on our right, and entered the woods. The path became hilly, with some serious rise and fall in its course. We had heard about some jungle animals venturing closer, not having had any prior contact with humans and therefore unafraid of them. Here we saw the trees and vines coming closer to us. As the path narrowed, we felt we had become denizens of the jungle. Now the people riding in jhanpāns seemed out of place, even vulgar, in this landscape.

Jhanpān is a kind of open palanquin or sedan chair with a single shaft, carried on the shoulders of four carriers. The carriers are arrayed in a single file because the narrow and difficult paths rule out carriers moving two abreast. When traversing a mountain ledge, if the carriers were to bump into the mountain wall on one side, all four of them and the jhanpān's live occupant would all fall into the deep canyon on the other side and go straight to heaven.

Strangely, people being carried in kandis – baskets – do not offend the eye as much as the jhanpān riders do. Kandi is a large wicker basket shaped like a straight-walled water glass. Filling half of it with personal belongings, the rider sits in it and sticks his legs out of slots cut out on the top part of the wall. The feet rest in crude stirrups. A porter carries it on his back like a backpack, with his arms going through rope loops over his shoulders and the arms staying free. To provide some relief to the shoulders, a strap goes around his forehead. The porter carries a *kubdi* — a T-shaped stick — to support the basket from underneath to relieve his head

and shoulders of the weight when not walking. Put the *kubdi* under the basket – and he gets temporary relief from the heavy burden.

One porter entrusted with one passenger's life and luggage! The passenger sits facing backwards. At first, this spectacle seems laughable; after some time when one gets used to it, though, this seems to be an appropriate mode of transport for this terrain. Talking among themselves at overnight stops, the porters refer to the weight of the 'corpse' they are saddled with. The 'corpses' know what they are called, but the custom requires them to ignore the practice as long as it is not uttered within earshot.

It being the peak of the pilgrimage season, we were never on the road by ourselves. We walked like ants in the middle of an endless row of pilgrims on the march. With us was this man riding in a jhanpān and accompanied by a sizeable group of dependents. We learned later that he had two wives, was childless, and on a pilgrimage to Badrināth to seek a resolution to that problem.

The jhanpān riders seem to carry one of two expressions. Some seem ashamed of their inability to walk and, while still alive, having to be carried on others' shoulders. The other expression is, "What? Am I so poor that I have to walk?", broadcasting one's mental poverty to the world.

This man belonged to the latter category. He sat in his jhanpān with his chest puffed out like a rooster, his eyes constantly on the move like a camel's. One wife walked behind him, trying hard to keep up with the jhanpān. He didn't like that, and issued his regal order, "Do you have a problem with moving faster? Hurry over to the next chatti and start cooking before we get there!"

I can still picture the fear and confusion in the woman's eyes. Short of stature, heavyset, clad in a green sari, a big old-fashioned vermillion dot on her forehead, a huge ring piercing her nose, curly hair partly flowing in the air and partly glued to her forehead with sweat – this saintly woman huffs and puffs up and down that Himālayan path. She throws furtive glances behind her, checking to see if she has embarrassed herself to us and then puts her head

down and rushes ahead, like the shame of Hindu society atoning for its sins.

We hear of Arab and Central Asian brutes of men who have no concept of honouring their women. Stories abound of these men sheltering themselves inside their tents sandstorms blowing outside, and ordering their women to go out and hold the ropes to keep the tents from blowing away. We read those descriptions and feel great compassion for the plight of those women. And then, we keep quiet when our own macho men sit around and force the women to slog away at demanding physical labour.

This woman was the man's first wife. She did not produce a child, and so he married again. That made her the lesser of the two wives, and, of course, a bonded labourer! So she had to rush ahead, find suitable cooking space for them in an unknown place, secure the necessary pots and pans from the chattiwala and start cooking.

That day, while we were eating at a chatti, that beast lost his temper for some reason. He started abusing his wife. All she did was to fold her hands and asked for forgiveness. But that didn't stop him from hitting her. The poor woman fell down, enraging him even further. Her back became the spot for him to stub out the itching fire in his foot.

The rest of the family just sat and watched all this happen. Whether the raging bull finally got tired or his hunger got the better of him is anybody's guess. But he sat down and ate heartily. Then he looked at his wife and said, "Go ahead, gorge yourself now." The wretched woman sobbed as she ate. Then she picked up all the dirty utensils and went to clean them.

Choosing not to interfere in what we thought was an internal family dispute, we sat and suffered through it all. Today, I hate myself for my irresolute cowardice. I remember thinking: is this what our Hindu beliefs require of us? When Manu wrote, "Where women are worshipped, there reside the gods" -- is this the kind of worship he had in mind? The husband may be the wife's guiding

light, but does that make her his slave or possession? Like a piece of cattle? If you ask a Sanātani scholar, he will most likely find you a scriptural reference to support that thinking. The Upanishads speak of humans as beasts of the gods. If the wife is to think of the husband as one equal to God, does that not make her an animal? I am sure when the sage who wrote that part of the Upanishad listens to this logic, he will sorely regret his error. Even if we accept that the ancient Hindu wisdom does indeed mandate the wife's unilateral duty to serve her husband, nowhere in the scriptures is it written that the husband has the right to demand and enforce *such* servility from his wife.

The sad fact is that our religion has become a polluted mixture of the old Hindu ideals and baser external influences. And, instead of making efforts to keep the religion pure, our learned logicians have chosen to defend every misinterpreted and misguided practice. Just like litterateurs tolerating poetic liberties with meters, our caste-based society has decided on a policy of mutual non-interference between diverse groups. In the end, it is cowardly tyrants who have benefited from this.

Scholarly interpreters do not realise that if the pure form of [Hindu] religious thought is not preserved, the entire religion gets a bad name, life in general becomes corrupted, and other religions get the better of us. Historically, whenever invading religions have won the battle over Hindus, the underlying cause has invariably been a blind adherence to some wrongly held beliefs and a lack of vigilance. We have the tendency to not stand up for or against anything. We rationalise that lack of courage to stand up as an act of tolerance. When we learn to use that same much-touted tolerance and bravery to fight injustice, we will have found a cure for all our miseries.

We finished that midday meal with those thoughts haunting us, and left the chatti without taking any rest. From the experience of the previous day or two, we had concluded that we could not afford to get to a chatti late. Just like on a steamship's deck class,

the passengers that get there early have the option of choosing as much space that they can occupy. These chattis are exactly like that. After all, what is a chatti? It is a collection of makeshift provision shops built for pilgrims by some shopkeepers. The ground may not have lost all its wetness; there is no law to provide for a minimum height of the walls. Roofs are either thatched with hay or leaves. And not being built with the Public Works Department's budget, the shape of the shop would depend on the available indentation in the mountain wall. The sophisticated city dweller's eyes may not like it at first glance but nothing else would blend into the jungle décor any better.

The shop's merchandise is stacked in one corner. What is the merchandise? Provisions like wheat flour, salt, red chili powder, ghee (clarified butter) and potatoes. The larger shops also sell dāl (lentils) and rice. Whether the shop is small or large, it will carry tobacco for sure. The tobacco here is not what we have back home. Leaf tobacco does not grow in the Himālaya, and the gadāku smoking tobacco sold here is a concoction with gud (unrefined cane sugar) added to it. A huge sack would contain cooking pots and pans relieving the pilgrims of the need to bring their own pots along. If they had to carry these bulky things on the pilgrimage, those utensils would probably earn more punya and the pilgrim would be crushed under that weighty punya and make an untimely ascent into heaven!

The farmers of this Himalayan region exercise a surprising amount of conservation discipline in the way they cook. They use an iron saucepan with near vertical walls for practically all of their cooking needs. They make their roti (bread) dough in that vessel and then set it aside on a rock. Then they light a three stone choolo – open stove – and use the same pot to roast the rolled rotis in. The rotis are stacked on a handkerchief, and the pot used to cook vegetables. No matter what the vegetable, the iron pot turns it into the same color. After a hearty meal of roti and vegetable, the pot

is rinsed clean and used to drink water from. Once the afternoon nap is over, the man would put that pot on his head like a hat, and wrap a cloth around it in the shape of a fentā headgear. The iron pot inside makes it into a hard hat that will protect the head even in the biggest hailstorm.

In spite of possessing such smartness and common sense, in the city-dweller's thinking, these mountain folk are nothing more than jungle savages. Savages indeed! The jungle dwellers can afford to have no physical handicaps, whereas being so handicapped is both the foundation and the hallmark of a civilised city person. A civilised person is defined as someone needing countless gadgets; a savage is one that is clever enough to live on the barest minimum of resources. A wonderfully apt definition, don't you think?

After the initial experiences, we learned to get to our destination early, find the best chatti available, set up a nice clean choolo and start cooking. When I say *we* did that, I mean Swāmi did. He could move with the swiftness of a racehorse. Buwā was the second to arrive, with me bringing up the rear because I carried the biggest burden – that of my need to greet and converse with every tree on our way. Every flower, every fruit, every bird I saw called out to me. If not them, the clouds in the sky spoke to me. Back in those days, I carried prayer beads in my hand and chanted as I walked.

So, with my attention divided between Mother Nature and the Mother Goddess, I was invariably the last one to arrive. But, once I arrived and settled down, I did not get up. I would sit and help with all the chores. Unpacking, setting everything up, repacking for the onward journey were all my tasks. When the firewood was not dry, I would even light the choolo for Buwā. I did all the dishwashing after we ate. The shopkeepers were very happy with the way I cleaned the pots before returning them. Swāmi possessed uncommon strength in his legs and his voice. He would reach everywhere and tackle all our problems. All in all, our diverse group of three managed our affairs rather well.

Our decision to hurry up and get to the chatti early served one more purpose. We did not have to contend with the two meek-as-cattle women, and their bull of a husband.

As we progressed further in our travels, our appetites grew as well. We would make a whole potful of dāl and polish that off between the three of us. We would save up a few rotis from the evening meal and have them with gud in the morning. In no time, our cheeks assumed the ruddiness of carrots. Any weight gain was out of the question. Daily 20–30 mile walk and weight-gain do not go together. The poor weight lay in us waiting for us to rest – so that it could grow. But whatever rest we did get came in good stead.

25

Devprayāg

When a train we are travelling in plunges into a tunnel, we see nothing but darkness. Our travels down memory lane encounter similar tunnels of pitch-black amnesia. In the Khandālā Ghāt tunnel between Mumbai and Pune, or the Tinai Ghāt tunnel between Belgaum and Goa, there are windows carved out of the mountains. When the train travels through these fairly long tunnels, momentary flashes of daylight break the darkness as we go past one of these windows, and then darkness returns to engulf us again. A brief twinkle of recollection comes through and then disappears, leaving us in an even denser stretch of those amnesiac dark stretches in one's memory.

I want to write about one such day lost to the murky depths of my blacked-out memory. I have virtually no visual recollection of Mahādev Chatti. The world is represented in our memory through names associated with mental pictures of its entities. If the visual element is removed from a memory, the name is all that remains of that entity. For me, nothing remains of the Mahādev Chatti memory now, except the name.

When we arrived at a stop, I sat down to rest – rather, I stretched out on my back. This was a very convenient habit of mine. I used every available minute to rest, thereby saving all possible energy for our travel on foot.

Swāmi seemed to want to keep going on. He saw me stretched out and said, "Don't tell me you are tired! I thought we would keep going for a while."

I said, "If you want me to get up just to walk around here, the answer is no. If the idea is to go five to ten miles to the next chatti, I am all for it. Let's go!" I jumped up and started walking.

We reached a new chatti farther down the road but it turned out to be a really small one. On the railway line, station facilities are designed to suit the needs of European travellers. There are stations equipped for dining, stations for tea breaks, and so on. On a pilgrimage route, the average distance traveled by pilgrims in a day is well established. The facilities tend to be set up at such distances. Then, travelers plan their stops accordingly. Obviously, a night-stop chatti would be larger than the day stops. By walking longer, we ended up spending a night at a day chatti. The day shops do not encounter many night customers and therefore these shopkeepers pay greater attention to the night stoppers.

We moved on from there and arrived near Devprayāg. Tucked into my waist was an old clock. It was older than me but still kept good time. I had neglected winding it for days now, and I, therefore, needed to rely on the Sun to tell me the time of day. Seeing a post office on the side of the road, it occurred to Swāmi to ask me to set my clock right. After bringing the clock back to life and setting it to the correct time, we entered the town of Devprayāg. Unless my memory deceives me, we met a Bengali sādhu named Mādhavānand for the first time here. I will have more to say about him later.

Devprayāg is one of the five holy confluences of the river Gangā. The town is situated on top of a mountain cliff — like a group of nests. It is divided into two parts. British land lies on one side of the river, and on the far side is the Tehri state territory. The Alaknandā comes down from Kedārnāth and flows over yellow soil in between; the Bhāgirathi Gangā travels from its origin at Gangotri and – with the extra fine sand shining bright on its banks – joins the Alaknandā here.

Buwā insisted that we needed a lotā – a small urn – with a wide mouth so that it can be cleaned properly, and can be useful to warm milk. Swāmi immediately left for the marketplace, because ahead there will be no markets to buy a lotā later, and returned with one. I put some water in it and found it to be leaking. Buwā asked Swāmi to go back and exchange it for a good one. Swāmi went back with the lotā filled with water. The kind shopkeeper gave him another one. Swāmi, burned by our rebuke for accepting a bad deal earlier, wasn't about to take one without testing. He poured water into the new lota, and it leaked too. The merchant gave him a third piece – only to find it leaking again. Three more lotās displayed the same fate.

We know of the storied Brahmin sage showing his power to stop the flow of water from a water sprinkler in the ancient Vāmanāvatār[71] days. But only our own Swāmi Ānandānand has displayed the ability to perform the incredible feat of making the lotās flow – in this magic-less age of Kaliyug! Mortified by what he saw, the poor merchant was convinced that Swāmi was some powerful sorcerer. He begged and implored Swāmi to withdraw his magic spell. Swāmi, no less perplexed by all this, accepted the refund of the original price of the lotā and returned to our chatti. Our folklore abounds with tales of magical feats. Perhaps the bulk of those are rooted in such real-life incidents!

I awoke early the next morning, went and sat on the bank of Alaknandā. The bank was a long way down from the top. I was completely lost in the quiet elegance of the river, and lost all track of time. Only when one of my colleagues came to get me did I realise I was not by myself, and that we had a pilgrimage to complete.

Evening came and Swāmi proposed that we go to the site of the confluence. We crossed a bridge to get to the temple and then descended to the rivers' confluence. Steel chains firmly anchored

71 Vāmanāvatār: Lord Vishnu's 'dwarf' incarnation.

in the rock are provided for pilgrims to hold while taking a dip in the Gangā. That immersion in the holy waters of the confluence may guarantee one a place in heaven eventually, but the chains protect the pilgrim from the powerful pull of the Bhāgirathi and from being instantly transported to heaven.

I recited and explained to Swāmi a Sanskrit verse describing the cooling effect of the mist produced by the Gangā's flow. We sat on the Bhāgirathi's bank enjoying that cool evening. A small bird sat on the opposite bank, and the river flowed fast in the middle. We kept staring at the bird. At first, he craned his neck and shook his head. Very shortly, Mother Nature cast her spell on the bird too; he went still and stared back at us. He didn't know our language, nor could we read his emotions. But Bhāgirathi brought our three hearts together and made them beat like one. Up above, the temple bell tolled, inviting the faithful to a view of the idol. But the three of us felt the Lord's presence among us, through this oneness of ours.

Swāmi and I were humans, able to light lamps and manage in the dark, with a shelter to spend the night in. But our friend on the other bank knew it possessed no mobility after dark. He rose with a heavy heart and reluctant wings, and flew off into the endless expanse of the sky.

We see thousands of birds in our daily life. We each have our separate existences. The only relationship we share with them is the constant dispute about sharing the crops in the field and fruits of the trees. And yet, that bird from Devprayāg still occupies a firm place in my heart. In times of real loneliness, I still long for his return, and of a reunion of our three hearts.

Back at the temple, Swāmi found an inscription indicating the date at which the temple was last renovated and by whom. We offered our worship to the idol and then returned to our chatti.

I dreamt of that bird at night. He must have been a part of a previous life of mine – a friend, a brother, perhaps a lover. I know I am never going to see him again. Who can say why he has become

the object of such idolatry for me? But if my worship is strong enough, he will come back. If he senses the intensity of my need, he will fly to me from wherever he is.

In the morning, we left the road for Badrināth, and headed for Gangotri using the Tehri route. We were accustomed to taking the road instinctively chosen by our feet. Well, there were two roads on two sides of the Alaknandā. Looking upstream, the road on the right leads to Badrināth, which, we decided, meant the one on the left must be the road to Tehri and we set off that way. We had gone some distance when we heard shouting from the opposite bank. Some porters we knew from before were trying to tell us something and waving to us. Swāmi heard their shouts before the rest of us, and only he understood what their gestures meant. We were going the wrong way. Once we realized our error, it did not take much thought as to what we had to do. Instead of retracing our steps, we just climbed up sideways and eventually got on the Tehri route.

Along the roadside, I noticed a bush that had bunches of tiny grain-sized orange-coloured fruit. Each bunch was the size of a large pea and carried 8 to 10 of those tiny berries separated by what looked like fur. I picked a couple of those bunches and ate them. They tasted exactly like an orange. Now there was no stopping me. I started picking and eating them in handfuls from that small tree. Then a thought occurred to me. I was not a jungle dacoit that would completely strip a tree of its fruit. A considerate king would tax his subjects but not take all their property away! I decided I should keep walking, and pick fruits without stopping and eating to my heart's content.

I did precisely that and enjoyed the taste for days.

26

Cancelled My Srinagar Plan

Swāmi, Buwā and I were on our way to Tehri from Devprayāg and enjoying the life-giving air of the Himālaya. Outwardly I was happy but a deep sorrow was gnawing at me. When I left home, it was not with the intention of visiting every single Himālayan shrine. I had this deep desire to become a resident of the age-old and renowned town of Srinagar, and to engage in sādhanā – a highly disciplined quest for spiritual knowledge. The Kashmiri city of Srinagar is different from this Srinagar. This Srinagar is situated on the road to Kedārnāth, and once was the capital of the Garhwali Kingdom. Srinagar is considered a Siddha Peeth – a seat for higher attainment. It is believed that sādhanā performed here is guaranteed to succeed and bears quick results. Devi-Bhāgavata mentions this as a place of major importance.

At one time, a rock slab with a Sri Chakra, the nine-interlocking-triangle pattern signifying the Divine Feminine, engraved on it was worshipped here. The legend says that daily human sacrifices used to be offered here. Supposedly, Ādi Shankarāchārya visited Srinagar and witnessed the inhuman ritual. He rose up with a huge crowbar, toppled the Sri Chakra rock and decreed a permanent stop to human sacrifices there.

Shankarāchārya performed invaluable service to Hinduism with his learned bhāsyas (commentaries) and stotras (hymns). But is there any doubt that the act of stopping human sacrifices is of an even greater value? Writing a commentary requires intellect of an extreme caliber. One can compose a hymn without feeling religious fervour and merely on the strength of imagination. In comparison, taking on a tradition-bound and fanatical social order in putting a stop to such a long-standing, inhumane-to-the-extreme practice takes extraordinary strength of character, righteous conviction and a big heart.

Ever since I heard of that human sacrifice-toppling episode, I cannot shake the vision of Shankarāchārya – the short and stubby physique, saffron clothes, thick beads around his neck, bare upper torso coated with ash and head shaved down to the neck. Ritualistic and heartless Goddess-worshippers are screaming bloody murder and have him surrounded, and this fearless and dignified sanyāsi stands there with a crowbar in hand. Not one of those 'brave' worshippers dares come close.

And, with a tremulous voice, the learned warrior sanyāsi issues an open challenge to debate him on that issue – to one or more of them at a time. However, there is none among them with sufficient intelligence to hold even a candle to the burning intelligence of our conqueror sanyāsi he who is religion incarnate.

Shankarāchārya must have issued his open challenge in perhaps the same words as used by the ancient sage of the Vedic era Yājnavalkya:

Learned Brahmins present here all,
Whoever desires to debate me at all,
Ask of me one, or all of you at once;
Else, let me ask one, or to all at once.

Let me return to the subject of my aforementioned desire for sādhanā. It occurred to me that I should meet Swāmi before going to Srinagar

for that purpose, and so I had gone to Almorā. On the way back, while in Haridwār, I decided to extend the trip towards Gangotri. After coming within 18 miles of Srinagar, I ended up leaving Devprayāg to go towards Gangotri. The prospects of visiting the other holy Himālayan shrines indeed excited me. Yet, the departure from my original intent saddened me no end.

The road to Tehri is lined with chir pine trees. Although their long green needles littered on the ground make for a very slippery walking surface, I made a wonderful discovery here. As much walking as we did, that too in the cold weather, it made my feet very dry. I developed cracks deep as river gorges in the soles of my feet. I was genuinely worried about my prospects of finishing our trip if a cure was not found soon. I had brought some kokum wax but that proved ineffective. Necessity being the mother of invention, I decided to try the resin secretions from the chir trees. I collected some of that viscous liquid and filled the cracks in my feet with it... and had beautiful results the very next day. The skin looked whole, as though it had never cracked! From that day on, I carried a matchbox filled with chir resin with me. Chir and other pine resins are used to produce rāl (rosin) and turpentine.

27

The Loving Touch

We must have gone about seven miles from Devprayāg. It was mid-day already, and hunger had staked out its insistent claim on our stomachs. Buwā cooked, and either Swāmi or I gathered leaves from a nearby peepal tree and made our disposable plates from them.

That started a big discussion. Buwā emphatically stated that it would be a sacrilege to use the holy peepal leaves for such purpose. I too knew about that prohibition. Peepal tree is considered a physical manifestation of God's many facets – 'I am the peepal among all trees' says the Lord in Bhagvadgeetā. Buwā argued that to eat from peepal leaves is in direct defiance of God's words and therefore denying Him.

I said, there is this old rule that forbids family men to eat from peepal leaf platters. Only the one that has left home and renounced all worldly possessions has the right to use such platters. For him, the Lord resides in everything, pervades all things. The Divine exists in the food, in the peepal leaf platter, and in the one that eats the food. 'For the one that recognises the unity in everything, what is the cause for delusion or distress?'[72]

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72 A quote from Isopanishad

Our hunger helped an immediate acceptance of my self-serving argument supported by my own 'Serve Thyself' rationalisation! Swāmi and I quickly recited the verse from Geetā making the symbolic offering of the food to the Universal Being, and started eating. Buwā was the designated cook and, following the age-old tradition, he fed us first before starting his own meal.

Buwā was an orthodox Hindu and strictly observed all the ritualistic practices dictated by the old-fashioned Sanātani rules. He had very firm beliefs in what constituted clean and touchable, what must be avoided. Swāmi did not understand nor believed in any of those things. I knew of those dictates, but did not practice them. Buwa felt that his beliefs and 'cleanliness' were not threatened if he ate separate from us. He would prepare our 'platters' and then call us to start eating. After we finish our meal, he would sit down to eat unworried about being disturbed. Feeding us first also helped satisfy his motherly instincts.

That day, Buwa sat down to eat from the aforementioned peepal leaf 'platter.' He had hardly started his meal when a Mārwādi merchant approached us. We had met this gentleman in Devprayāg the day before. Overjoyed to see us, and overcome by his goodwill for us, he bowed low to us and touched our feet. While the Mārwādi gentleman's eyes flowed with tears of joy, Buwā had turned pale upon being touched. Buwa's long beard and flowing mane, freshly bathed clean torso, a copy of the tome Dāsbodh[73] and the prayer beads sitting next to him – all this must have awed the Mārwādi gentleman into feeling blessed to have met such a holy person for a second time. On the other hand, how did Buwā feel about this 'touching' encounter?

In general, I had always respected Buwā's orthodox religiosity. Even though it caused substantial discomfort at times, I had put up with it with good humour. Aware of that, Buwā had asked me

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73 *Dāsbodh*: The book by Samartha Swāmi Rāmdās presenting the essence of many Vedic texts.

while aboard a boat on the Gangā, "Look, I know the hardships I create for you. It will be difficult for me to do this, but if you want, I am ready to forgo my 'contact' restrictions for the duration of our travels."

I had told him, "No, I cannot accept that. I myself gave up on that practice only after I was convinced that it had no meaning. You may choose to abide by the maxim 'When on the road, behave as the lower caste shudras do,' but I would not have you do it for my sake. Those restrictions will fall away when your inner self decides that way. Until that happens, it is in your best interest to continue with them."

The moment the Mārwādi gentleman touched him, Buwā looked at me. Going hungry for a day meant nothing to Buwā. In fact, he was quite accustomed to fasting. Realising that he had made a mistake, the poor Mārwādi started looking around for means to clean up. Meanwhile, I told Buwā, "If you give up this meal, you will be making a big mistake, Buwā! I wish you would continue eating without any worry at all. Please understand that it is not a Mārwādi merchant that has touched you; you have been touched by piety personified. Your orthodox beliefs must give way to such an act of devotion and reverence. Do you realize what a cruel shock it would be on that devout heart if he sees you go hungry? Please eat – not with any resentment, but with a happy heart."

Tears rolled off Buwā's eyes – tears of extreme emotion, not of hurt. He finished that meal with a joy similar to what he would experience eating the holy prasād – offerings to a deity – from a temple.

We did not linger there for any rest and moved on. The surroundings were getting prettier by the hour. The chir trees fell behind to be replaced by the banj variety of oak trees which produce extremely hardy lumber.

As evening approached, we arrived at a chatti. While I sat near a beautiful little tree, Swāmi went to seek some accommodation for the night. The shopkeeper refused to give us any space, and we

decided to spend the night under a bushy canopy nearby. We had settled there for just a few minutes before our porters arrived. The two porters and the luggage they carried established our prestige in the shopkeeper's eyes and he gave us a warm slot for the night. When Swāmi lit our stove, that small wonder attracted a lot of people to come and gawk at it.

The few minutes we had spent under the canopy before moving out influenced our subsequent travel plans in a big way. We met a sādhu from South India sitting there. He told us about the Amarnāth shrine in Kashmir. There, far from any human population and in the middle of nowhere, is this cave. A water drip gradually forms an ice shiv-ling – the phallus-shaped representation of Lord Shiva – which is completed by the full moon night every month. It then starts melting and is completely gone by the New Moon night. This cycle repeats itself month after Lunar month. Hearing that sādhu's narration of this miraculous phenomenon firmed up my desire into a resolve to visit Amarnāth at the first opportunity. My going to Kashmir with Buwā to fulfill that resolve is the subject of a separate account.

I had my meal as I nursed that resolve, and then tried to rest my tired bones in the warmth of my blanket. As luck would have it, our shopkeeper had a celebration of some sort going that night. A mountain minstrel had come to entertain the gathering. His singing – pleasing to the ears of the mountain folk no doubt – made sleeping difficult for us. The rhythm of the music was so unique that it even blended into the occasional dream I had in my fitful sleep.

28

Tehri

Any recollection of the songs of the Himālayan mountain folk immediately brings to mind the famous Wordsworth poem 'The Solitary Reaper.' Why? I first heard that music when I saw this hardy pahādi maiden in her traditional mountain garb, swinging her sickle at the tall grass while she sang. The pure Himālayan air to breathe, a nutritious diet of wheat and milk and hard physical work must have imparted that rosiness to her complexion. Her strange mountain attire immediately brought to my lips Kālidāsa's words, 'On one endowed with such beauty, what attire would not look good'?

We were negotiating a half-moon shaped valley and the air carried her singing very clearly. The lines from Wordsworth leapt into my mind:

Will no one tell me what she sings?–
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago:
Or is it some more humble lay,
Familiar matter of to-day?
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,
That has been, and may be again?

I got the distinct feeling that this maiden's song would not end either. The refrain kept repeating itself, and the distant mountains played along by echoing that refrain. Unlike Wordsworth, I did not stand 'motionless and still,' but I still bear the song's echoes in my heart, long after 'it was heard no more'.

Mountain music must not have much variety to offer. Later, after concluding our travel to Badrināth and on our way back, in the town of Ganai, we had listened to these songs all night long. It had sounded to our ears as though the same line was being repeated over and over for the entire night. Their music does not appear to have changed much from the ancient chants of Sāma Veda [that repetitively used as few as three notes] as evidenced by the virtually monotonous singing style prevalent even today.

The following day, we completed a sixteen-mile trek to reach the town of Tehri. The woods we saw along the way were incredibly beautiful. How does one go about describing that in words? Writing long sentences with superlative terms does not make the writer happy, nor does it convey much to the reader. I believe it is only proper not to make that futile attempt here.

We scampered down a mountain path like monkeys and arrived in Tehri. The mountain people consider Tehri their beautiful city, and the clock tower its biggest jewel. They will tell you with much awe, 'automobiles run on the roads of Tehri.'

We entered Tehri with famished stomachs, and immediately saw a Sikh dharamsālā. A dharamsālā is not an inn, but a shrine where the Granth Sāhib is housed, recited and listened to. A dharamsālā combines the good elements of both a Hindu temple and a mosque. Its administrator is called a granthi.

The granthi of the Tehri dharamsālā's treated us very nicely and made sure we had the facilities we needed. As usual, Swāmi handled the procurement of all the provisions, and Buwā did the cooking. The only strenuous job for me was to descend the tall ghāt to the Bhāgirathi and take a dip before coming back to eat.

I was exhausted from the day's long hike. The presence of a post-office in Tehri compelled Swāmi to write letters. I am convinced

that he writes these countless letters only to justify the existence of the postal system. I have had no occasion to believe otherwise because I never read his letters to me.

Buwā engaged the granthi in a conversation about Sikhism. Both of them believed that they were conversing in Hindi. The granthi knew a little Hindi and spoke pure Punjabi; Buwā used a mix of Marathi and Gujarati with a few Hindi suffixes; and, between them, they achieved a sense of inter-province unity!

I, being the 'ultra-orthodox sādhu' I was, would not engage in either of those sacrilegious activities! I spent a whole hour instead in nap-meditation with the help of a warm afternoon sun.

Before embarking on this Himālaya trip, I had met with Swami Gyānānand of Bhārat Dharma Mahāmandal. He had given me the name of a certain influential Pundit – a scholar – in Tehri. We went to see this person. Our aim was to get any useful travel information from him, and all he wanted was the chance to show off his punditry. Now, our Swāmi is an expert publicist. When the Pundit learned that I had a college degree, he got up and invited me to take the chair.

When Swāmi announced that 'our Kākā here' had studied in depth the major religious tomes, the Pundit immediately asked me what causes a person's awakening from samādhi – the deeply meditative state of being free from ego-consciousness. I could have told him of my awakening from my afternoon samādhi, but our reason for visiting was to seek information about the route to Gangotri. His challenge for a theological debate caused something of a dilemma for me. If I were to tell him I didn't know the answer, I would have made a liar of Swāmi. If I provided any answer at all, that would start a protracted debate. So, I chose to employ the trick suggested in *Kalividamban.*[74] I told him that everything I

74 *Kalividamban*: A humorous Sanskrit work on the ways for a half-wit to win over a whole assembly.

had read was in English. If he asked me any question in English, I would answer his query in detail. The poor Pundit was extremely disappointed by this turn of events, and I had saved myself from the debate. Had I not, my inexorable fate[75] would not have let me awaken from that debate.

Next, we went to pay our respects to a South Indian sādhu named Swāmi Pragnānand. We had heard that this learned person had been deeply involved in the 1857 uprising and had eluded capture dressed as a sādhu. After spending some time roaming around the Himālaya, he had finally arrived here in Tehri. Tehri was in the midst of a bad plague epidemic at that time.

The story goes that this sādhu performed some rituals, established a Panchmukhi Māruti shrine and miraculously defeated the deadly disease. The grateful King of Tehri became his fervent follower and named the Swāmi his rājyaguru – the Royal Spiritual Advisor. The fame of his intense scholarship spread far and wide, and students traveled long distances to seek answers to paradoxical questions.

We had no paradoxes to solve but, drawn by sheer curiosity, we went to see him. We spent a few hours that evening at his place. I noticed that a widow-disciple of his was performing some ritual with a Sri Chakra engraved on a copper sheet. The woman then lit an earthen lamp and had us sit by the Swāmi. We chatted with the 'Royal' Swāmi at length and got much information from him. After visiting the main temple and bowing our heads to the five-headed Hanumān idol, we returned to our residence.

The principal Tehri attraction is its picturesque wire suspension bridge over the Bhāgirathi. On the near side of the bridge, the banyan and peepal trees with the broad raised platforms around them draw immediate attention. The shaded platforms here are far more comfortable for weary travellers and itinerant sādhus than

75 Fate: The answer to the Pundit's query. 'Unseen' fate is what awakens one from samādhi.

the dharmashālās. Where the shade from the banyan and peepal trees overlap, these spots are considered especially suitable for chanting and other spiritual activities.

The banyan tree with its aerial roots descending from the branches establishes a big and yet undivided family entity that symbolises the Hindu ideals for the phase of family life – Grihasthāshram. On the other hand, the peepal tree sheds all its leaves and resists the formation of skin bumps, thereby suggesting renunciation and detachment from material life, symbolising the fourth and final phase – Sanyastāshram – in a man's life. This explains why Hindu society sees much to revere where symbols of the two Āshrams meet.

Tehri is a well-known feudal mountain state. There was a time in our history when the kingdom's expanse and fame were sizeable. Its borders stretched as far as the far extremities of the Himālayan range. Today we know it only for the incomes derived from its forestland. Its other dubious claim to fame is the prevailing illiteracy and timid attitude of its population. The current ruler shows no interest in educating his people and, in fact, believes that education only helps spread discontent among the subjects. We heard this shocking piece of information from a teacher at an English medium school. I asked myself why a teacher would want to remain in a place like this.

These days, we are trying to provide tools and facilities to our nationalist institutions. We discuss what all we would do if financing were available. Then we hear about these royal heirs to their heroic ancestors. They have all the means at their disposal but give no thought to doing anything worthwhile. If they do think at all, that thinking is misdirected at best. The struggle of 1857 failed, so our learned Pundit decided to immerse himself in meaningless philosophical debates. And the kings? Enumerating all the things they have immersed themselves into will bore us to death.

So what if we lost the 1857 War of Independence? Every failure should fuel a redoubled effort. The lessons learned from a defeat are of no less value than a victory. We read about the many successful

new discoveries made by scientists. Why do we forget the patience needed to conduct hundreds of unsuccessful experiments before reaching even one success?

Blessed is the person that can take countless defeats and not give up trying. Immediately upon being defeated in 1857, intelligent and industrious people should have discussed what contributed to that loss. What were the bad national traits that turned victory that was within reach into ignominious defeat? What was wrong with our methodology? What changes should we make in our social structure to correct it? How can we get the entire population behind a future attempt? Who are the people that defeated us? What is their country like? What is the character of its people, and what did they have to do to develop that character? Do we possess those same traits even in a dormant state? How do we identify those traits, and then develop them?

Instead of contemplating such things, the king decided to grant the sanyāsi an income; the scholar sanyāsi offered the king his blessings; the two joined together to give the people a new five-headed idol – and fifty years flowed by without any change in the national character.

Just as only the impotent try to live off their past glory, the people that blame everything on their ancestors' mistakes are impotent as well. I have come to the Himālaya; my concentration has turned inwards; I have no responsibilities or attachments. Should I not take it upon myself to think about all this? I decided I had to do that.

These thoughts had their sway over my mind while the goddess of sleep slowly pulled my tired body into her realm.

We hit the road towards Dharāsu in the morning.

29

Bādaru's Village

I had later returned to the Tehri area after completing our Himālaya trek, although from a different direction. I had spent some months at the Swāmi Rāma Tirtha monastery located in the nearby village of Māladiwal. That experience was not only poetically beautiful; it also brought a permanent change in my thinking about a few things.

In the course of the travels described in this book, we did not get to know anything about that village. In the chronology of my mind though, Māladiwal – along with its solitude in the midst of a crowd – sits right next to Tehri. If I could have condensed that unforgettable experience to fit into this narrative, I certainly would have. However, that would be appropriate only in a stroll down memory lane. When you uncap a bottle of perfume, its strong fragrance rushes out and fills the entire room. Likewise, the mere mention of the name Māladiwal turns loose so many streams of bittersweet memories that it would be unjust, if not impossible, to contain them within one or two articles. I have no choice here but to shut those memory doors, and get back on the road to Dharāsu.

The extroverted Pundit officer in Tehri, indoctrinated into the Tehri King's philosophy, gave us the information on the appropriate route to Gangotri and Jamanotri. Then he raised a different topic.

He said, the residents of the Jamanotri region do not cleanse themselves with water after a bowel movement. They believe that such use of water from holy rivers like Gangā and Yamunā is committing sacrilege. We occasionally try to preach the need for cleanliness to them, but a doubt often arises in our minds. Even if we consider this belief to be rooted in ignorance, do we have the moral right to challenge that strong belief? Acts of thievery are virtually unknown. No house or storage chests inside are ever locked. They do not know how to tell lies. They may occasionally be reluctant to state the truth, but would not dream of substituting a falsehood for it.

I do not remember his exact words, but he asked, "Now you tell me what we should do. Do we shatter that blissful state of ignorance and make them behave like us? Or should we leave them alone in their stupid but innocent mindset?"

I told him, "I do not envy them their current status. A cow is sacred not because it cannot tell lies. A rock does not become a sage by the fact that it remains silent. These fish here spend every moment of their lives bathing in the holy Gangā, which by itself does not get them into heaven."

I stopped him before he could voice his comment and continued, "Yes, I know the verse you are thinking of. It is nothing more than a poet's imagination. You may want to describe the fish's existence as heavenly. However, their incessant bathing in the waters of the Gangā is not going to elevate them to the heaven that all of us strive to attain in the afterlife by living a clean life now. It would be wrong to withhold the truth [about their lack of cleanliness] from these people. Their blind following of ignorant beliefs is not the same as having faith. We humans are capable of telling lies. We also have the ability to resolutely fight that trait and eventually make it impossible to exercise that ability to tell a lie. Not only do we experience the joys of truthfulness, but having truth on our side makes our actions attain their fruits without fail.[76] It is a great

76 *'Having truth on our side...'*: 'When one is firmly established in speaking the truth, the fruits of action become subservient to him.' Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* 2:36.

misfortune to be kept in the darkness of ignorance; but it is a mortal sin to deliberately cause ignorance. The feeling of security that comes from ignorance is frightening and dangerous. The tendency to see truth in everything you hear is not faith; it is naïveté, it is stupidity, plain and simple."

The road beyond Tehri was relatively flat and our pace picked up. Normally we walked faster than our porters, irrespective of the road's incline. That day, I noticed that the porters constantly stayed ahead of us. This being rather unusual, I mentioned to Swāmi, "Did Bādaru and Kairāsing suddenly grow younger? They are outracing us today!"

Swāmi said, "We are going to pass their village today. They are excited about going home, and they cannot walk fast enough."

Then, he heaped praise on these mountain people for their deep love of home. He quoted verses from the famous song 'Home, Sweet Home' and expressed regret that this sentiment is absent in our country.

I said, "Patriotism – pride for one's country - is a new concept for us. Our traditions consider arrogance to be a fault in character [and that kind of intense pride in anything our own is virtual arrogance]. I believe 'country-worship' to be a better choice of words. But our age-old phrase is 'love-for-the-motherland'. Does that not sound beautiful? Some poets have characterized that kind of personalized love as a weakness. But Lord Krishna expressed his longing for Gokul-Brindaban – where he spent his childhood – all through his adult life. That longing was but a personal version of the 'love-for-country' sentiment."

Had I known earlier that we were going to be in Bādaru's village that day, I would have bought some sweets for his children. Swāmi liked the idea of sweets for the children, but where were we going to find sweets in this forest now? Just about then, we came upon a dharmashālā - with a sweet-shop right next to it!

We found Bādaru there – waiting, only to make sure that we were not planning to stop there. He pleaded with us, "The day is

still young. If you walk a little bit faster, we can make it to our village in no time. It is not too far off our travel route." Swāmi quickly bought some sweets, and jovially assured Bādaru that we were not only going to get him home by nightfall, but were planning to have our meal there.

We took our detour from the road, and started walking fast towards our porters' village. The thought of hosting us gave our poor porters the same joy as Shabari and Vidur[77] must have felt welcoming their divine guests.

On the way, I heard a story about a man working in the bushes, getting bitten by a snake and dying about a year ago. Generally, any mention of snakes triggers a long discussion. Some topics are perennial favourites of people. Terror of outlaws, experiences of a bad famine and ghost sightings are all topics meriting interminable discussions. Snake tales, likewise, take on lengthy dimensions of their own.

We walked along our serpentine path while Bādaru told us all about his home and his family. I noticed tall stone fences bordering farms and asked Bādaru some questions. The more questions I asked, the more Bādaru opened up. That lasted until we got close to his village.

Suddenly, Bādaru lost all interest in talking to us. It was evening, and the farmers were heading home from their farms. Bādaru asked everyone we met about his wife and children and enquired about how other relatives and friends were doing. He was obviously overcome with excitement.

Finally, we reached his home, did our cooking right outside, and relished the lovingly offered ghee, milk and yogurt. Then we sat and chatted with the throng that had gathered to see us.

Kairāsing and Bādaru were quite unlike the hungry porters we see in large cities. They had their own homes; they had farms,

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77 Shabari and Vidur: Characters of meager means from the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahabhārata* who played hosts to Lord Rāma and Lord Krishna respectively.

raised crops, owned cattle and had a good social standing in their village. What mountain people lacked was cash earnings. That was the reason they went and worked as porters in the short pilgrimage season and earned fifty to a hundred rupees. That much money would comfortably see them through a whole year, and they wouldn't risk having to sell any property, at dirt cheap prices, to meet their needs.

We told the gathering, "We don't have such big mountains where we live. The roads run straight and level, and people ride in horse carts to get around. And …"

The older women immediately jumped on that. "Straight roads? No ups and downs at all? What a shame! Don't your legs get tired of walking like that? And – how do you walk in the hot sun?"

However, when I told them that a coconut sold for only 2 or 3 paisā[78] over there, all the villagers – young and old alike – were tempted to move south, to our part of the country. In the Himālayan mountain areas, you paid at least five to six times as much for a coconut. Because of the cost involved, coconuts offered to a deity are not cut open for distribution as consecrated food. A coconut so offered to a temple would find its way back into the market and get reused over and over in the course of a year. As such, even if one is broken open there is no guarantee it would yield fresh and edible white flesh.

Somehow, the conversation turned to the supply of water for household use. I told them that back home we did not have to haul water in from a remote stream or lake, that every home had its own well. The young village girls found it impossible to visualise what a well would look like. The old ladies actually expressed their compassion, "Life must be really hard for your women. Only they would dare to pull water from those deep wells! We are lucky we do not have that problem. All we have to do is to fill our narrow-

78 Paisā: 1/64th of a rupee under the British rule.

mouthed urns from the reservoir and carry the urns on our heads. We are home in no time."

Home in no time, indeed! The reservoir or the river may be half a mile away, up or down the mountain, and they would not think anything of it. However, drawing water from a 30 foot deep well is hard labour – a cruel punishment for these folks!

The next day, Bādaru said, "I am staying back in the village but my son will go with you instead. He is as strong as a horse and will do a good job for you." We agreed with the arrangement.

Bādaru's wife, however, balked against sending her 22-year old 'baby' into an 'alien' land and vetoed the arrangement. Bādaru bellowed in protest, but finally gave in and picked up his load.

30

Over The Rāri Pass

Try as I might, I cannot picture the road from Bādaru's village to Dharāsu. Our relationship with Bādaru and Kairāsing had been of masters and hired servants up until we became their guests in their village. A sense of equality was unavoidable once we had tasted their hospitality, used the ghee and milk supplied by them, and spent the night in their courtyard. The demands for khichdi on days of rest and the daily quarrels for popped wheat became a thing of the past. We – the former masters – became far more talkative and showed more concern about whether they had eaten and what they ate.

In short, we got much closer to Bādaru and Kairāsing than before. This familiarity did not result in any deterioration in the quality of their work. On the contrary, our leniency encouraged them to look for ways to make our lives more comfortable. There is no doubt that servants and other workers feel more inclined to provide better service when treated with compassion and goodwill rather than sternness. An even greater benefit is that if you rid them of their anxieties, the servants learn to use their heads productively and blossom into more intelligent beings.

The porter community in Dharāsu seemed agitated that night. Some big zamindā – feudal lord – from Bengal had his camp set

up there. His personnel manager and the porters were in a furious and noisy argument about something, and there was no peace to be found for hours. I have a vague recollection of meeting a group of pilgrims from Gujarat, and Swāmi talking to them. We met them again at Gangotri and I remember having to give a ruling to their cook about some Hindu dietary rule.

The road to Jamanotri splits off at Dharāsu. Until then, we had made no decision on whether to go to Jamanotri. We finally decided to go there. That required negotiating a new contract with the porters on the spot, and we set off that way. Kairāsing commented, "We hardly ever venture out to the Jamanotri region. The area on the other side of this mountain is not safe. There are big problems there."

That comment was indicative of the mountain folk's mindset. A big mountain like that represented the edge of their world. Physical crossing of a big mountain is child's play for them. But the land beyond that mountain is alien land, the people that live there are different from us... these are the firm beliefs in their minds.

This reminded me of some lines from a William Cowper poem we were forced to memorise at school:

> *Land intersected by a narrow frith*
> *Abhor each other. Mountains interposed*
> *Make enemies of nations, who had else*
> *Like kindred drops been mingled into one.*

We invoked the name of Mother Yamunā and started walking. The Bengali sādhu named Mādhavānand – who spoke no other language than Bengali – also decided to join us.

Soon we entered a dense forest. There was nothing but shade wherever we looked. The trees were absolutely still and gave the illusion of a convention of Rishis in deep trance. The three of us were psyched up, and forged ahead.

Mādhavānand was not able to keep up with us and kept falling behind. Swāmi said, "If the poor fellow gets lost in this jungle, he

is going to end up in some beast's stomach. Why don't we halt and wait for him?"

Now, which traveller in his right mind would not like to rest his feet? I was all for it, but refused to sit down. I would stand leaning on my hiking staff made of stout nāgawet wood, and rested my feet that way. I had learned from experience that if I sat down, blood would rush to my feet and they would swell up, making further travel very painful. I preferred to wait until we reached our way-stop and only then would I sit.

Does that rule not hold true for every struggle in life?

Mādhavānand had fallen behind but walked no faster. I let out a roaring proclamation of the Om[79] syllable:

Om Shānti ... Shānti ... Shānti...
(Peace... Peace... Peace...)

From the distance came Mādhavānand's reply:

Shānti ... Shānti ... Shānti...

But all those stops to wait for him ate up much time. By nightfall, we had barely reached the top of the mountain instead of being down on the other side as planned.

On the way to the top, we had seen a narrow trail leading to a nesado – a small shepherd settlement and lost some time exploring that as well. A pitch black darkness engulfed us.

Which was the way to our eternal salvation, and which were the diversions in pursuit of illusory progress? We looked all around us, looked up, looked down and saw no way to the top.

Finally, we resorted to travellers' intuition and decided to leave the trail. When blinded by darkness, who could we trust but the Almighty! Loudly chanting Shānti – Peace – we finally made it to the summit. Soon, the moon rose and we could almost see (instead of sense) the darkness around us.

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79 Om or Aum: The all-encompassing mystical symbol in Hinduism.

The question of what we would eat did not even arise. We would consider it a blessing just to find a place to spend the night. We had heard that there was a Forest Department office somewhere along the road. Now we started looking for it in earnest.

Buwā thought he had heard the sounds of people talking, and Swāmi went in the pointed direction. He came back with 'intelligence' that the sound was from a Forest Rangers lookout post above us.

We started walking in that direction but were stopped short by the two-legged uniformed tigers who did not want us to come any closer to their post. They growled, grumbled, charged at us... but we were not to be deterred. Swāmi's voice magic worked even in the dark and the tigers turned somewhat tame. They allowed us on the raised platform surrounding the post.

Pretty soon, conversation started flowing. The guards explained the strict forestry laws and why they were needed: if someone tossed a still-lit beedi, that could start a fire and the entire forest could go up in smoke, putting people's lives in jeopardy. Worse yet, it could damage government property!

Then Mādhavānand arrived and unleashed an unstoppable stream of Bengali oratory. I, in my time, had tried to read a few pages of the classic *Ānandmath*. Being able to read the Bengali script is one thing, learning the pronunciation of Bengali words is quite another. That must be learned from a guru's 'mouth!' I tried to tell Mādhavānand a few times that I did not understand a word of spoken Bengali. I repeated that in Marathi, then in Hindi and finally, in the spirit of altruism, tried to tell him in English.

None of that was enough to break into his monologue. Some poet's words 'I sing because I must' describes Mādhavānand's attitude to a tee. He did not care whether I understood what he was telling me. It was sufficient for him to know that I had human ears. I was forced to drink from the flow of his speech-nectar. My only recourse being to become a dispassionate nonparticipant, I listened to his barrage quietly. Needless to say, his words had as much impact on me as rain falling on a water buffalo's hide.

The moon was shining in all its glory, but the sky was not very clear. Being too tired to give vent to our lunacy, we promptly fell asleep.

My memory probably deceives me, but something tells me it was on that day after leaving Dharāsu that I had this inexplicable experience. As we were walking, we passed a location that gave me this eerie feeling of déjà vu– that I had known that place from before, that I had lived there at some time. I cannot explain where that feeling came from. I have thought hard about it on countless occasions, but have not been able to decide why I had that feeling.

I had certainly never visited the place prior to that day. Then why did it feel so familiar? The place certainly was exceedingly beautiful. Would that beauty have brought some dormant fantasy to life and possessed me like a demon? The poet Kālidāsa would have been quick to say:

I recollect not, but surely sense
This affectionate and steady bond,
Perhaps from my existences past.

(Abhijnānshākuntalam)

What I know for sure is that this feeling was so powerful that I was tempted to give everything up and settle down there.

The question I had to ask myself, however, was: would a rational mind give in to the force of such poetic imagination and live a secluded life in an unpopulated jungle location?

31

The Sage of Yamunā Bank

We left for Gangāni in the morning. The glimpses of faraway snow had pleased my heart no end. But then, there was hardly a thing to displease the heart in this naturally beautiful land. The only difficulty I saw that morning was that one cannot view and enjoy nature going downhill, as much as one can during the uphill climb. During the climb, by necessity we go slow, we can look around; uphill progress is physically strenuous but requires little body control. Going downhill, while gravity forces us to go faster, there is a greater need to watch one's footing. Every step puts a strain on the ankle and knee joints, and requires us to save our feet and legs from injury. Lord Shiva has his third eye; my staff was my third leg to protect me from many evils.

There is much to see in the forest. There are all those varieties of trees and leaf shapes, the strategic placements of hills big and small, and high mountaintops competing with one another. What attracted my attention the most was the tree trunks. From an early childhood, the trunks of trees have reminded me of Vishwāmitra and other ancient sages. The branches astonish me with their resemblance to the bāwās training for wrestling on a mallakhamb[80] pole and

80 Mallakhamb pole: A seven-and-a-half-foot tall pole of polished teak used for training and gymnastic competitions.

tying themselves into virtual knots. I associate the shapes of trunk and branches, the texture and colour of the bark with each tree's attitude. Some trees seem to believe their purpose in this world is to be harsh on themselves. Some have a rotund shape, like affluent people with a sedentary lifestyle. Trees with branches growing at weird angles are reminiscent of the helpless but unbending struggles of Chhatrapati Rājarām in the history of Mahārāshtra. Some trees appear to be record keepers of the entire forest's history. Some trees have such delicate skin that they make us feel uneasy, just like King Dushyant did to see the austerity-practising and emancipated Shakuntalā in Kālidāsa's *Abhijnānasākuntalam*. Some trees seem to open their hearts, in the depressions of their trunks and branches, for bees to build their hives, and birds their nests.

You witness the true glory of the trees when the sun comes out after the rains end. Or when flocks of birds teem on a tree looking like flowers. The chir pines have fibres in the shape of loops of ropes in their trunks. That gives the distinct impression of the extra effort Mother Nature has made to make these trees stronger.

I was walking downhill and observing nature's beautiful work when I looked towards the bottom and sighted the Yamunā. I had no difficulty recognising her. Yes, this was the same Yamunā that I had bathed in at Prayāg; whose turtles I had seen fighting monkeys in Vrindāvan; that had amazed me with its reflection of the Tāj Mahāl; and whose name I had associated with images of Krishna defeating Kāliya – the cobra with a hundred hoods.

She looks like a strong and healthy beautiful girl of sixteen; unconscious of her age, she frolics around, filling the surroundings with the tinkling of the bracelets on her wrists and ankles, completely oblivious to the world.

When we got down from the mountain and approached her, her clean water appeared to us in a multitude of colours. One moment it wears this dark complexion. When it collides with the rocks in its stream, it assumes the colour of blue vitriol crystals. When her waves hit the rocky banks and break up, they are pristine white.

In a few seconds, the water changes back to its serious dark blue again.

The playful behaviour of its clean water seems to make the elderly and mammoth-bodied rocks come alive and feel blessed to be so fortunate. The water dances in its youthful joy, the rocks remain immersed in their own contented sanguineness. What must be their thoughts? Did they know what was going through my mind?

We crossed the white sands of the beach and sat down on the river's edge. A group of young mountain girls walked by us and seemed curious about what we were looking at. They peered closely to find what it was that interested us that much. They walked away giving us the 'there is nothing there' look. How could they possibly read what thoughts were going through my head?

This place is also called Gangāni. Did the name originate from 'Gangā' + 'āni', meaning, the Gangā was brought here?

As the story goes, there was a Rishi – a sage – that lived here. He idolised the Gangā and the Yamunā – the two mother rivers equally. He made sure to visit and pay his respects to both rivers every single day. He lived here on the bank of Yamunā, but went to bathe in the Gangā every morning. The monster Rādhi mountain was in his way but he never paid any mind to that. Taking that twenty mile hike over the mountain was child's play to him. He followed that daily routine as long as his body could endure it.

When old age had sapped his strength and he was too weak to make the trek, the sage beseeched the holy Gangā for help. The Ganga took pity on him and materialised as a white brook near his āshram by the river Yamunā. The legend does not tell us how long the grateful sage lived to bathe in the 'new' Gangā.

We visited the site of that stream. I felt the affection for him that I would for an ancestor of my own. He must have been a great ascetic, but certainly no less of a poet. The definition of a poet being 'someone who writes poetry' is both incomplete (there are poets that do not write poetry) and an overstatement (there are those

that write 'poems' but are not poets). The more correct definition would be, 'a poet is one that lives poetry'.

Our sage must have worshipped the Gangā and the Yamunā for at least thirty to forty years. What must he have felt when he made the resolution to pay his respects every day? How happy must he have been to keep that resolution all his life? To go on a pilgrimage to the four holiest of shrines and experience something new every day points to one kind of cultural refinement. However, to travel the same path twice a day – every day of one's life, and yet find new enjoyment every time indicates another kind of culture, a more mature and deeper culture. A time must have come when our sage got to know every single tree on the Rādhi mountain – nay, even the smallest fluffy cloud there. He must have witnessed the birth and maturing of countless trees on the path. A million times, he must have seen the waters of Yamunā rise and fall. Eventually, with nothing new to be curious about, his daily trek must have helped his mind turn inwards and think with the resulting single-mindedness. Such contemplation has been known to break through the biggest worldly and spiritual enigmas, far better than the explosives used to blast through rocks.

When I came out of my deep musings about the Sage and his devotion, I found Buwā and Swāmi gone from the spot. I spotted them in the distance, buying fresh yogurt from a hut. I walked over to join them. We partook of that yogurt with a deep sense of having received consecrated offering from the Sage of Yamunā himself.

32

Rānāgām

Leaving Gangnāni behind us, we moved on. Swāmi, as usual, walked fast and led the way. Buwā would work hard trying to keep up with Swāmi. I, a non-believer in competing with anyone, walked slowly and brought up the rear. Speed and exhaustion had never been my favorite companions.

Along the way, we saw the camp of some strangely dressed mountain people. It was not an established village, but appeared to be the temporary settlement of a nomadic group. I have always sensed a fiery intensity and criminal lust in the apparel, the gestures and the eyes of women members of such wandering groups. The characteristics we normally associate with women – the weaker sex and femininity – did not apply to them. These women frightened me even as they walked past us.

The other characteristic of these itinerant people is their laziness. If they must do something, they do it very quickly and efficiently. However, once the job is done, they sink back into their indolent state. Their constant worry appears to be 'I don't understand why God gave us so much time,' and they tend to spend all that available time in yawning with boredom. Our path unexpectedly curved to the right near their makeshift settlement, and we had to stop there

to get our bearings straight. That more or less forced us to observe their strange behaviour.

The path beyond got progressively difficult. Swāmi, Buwā and I had to put our heads together to decide which way to go. The terrain ahead was scattered with huge skeleton-like rocks. It looked very much like an ancient battlefield where multiple mountains had collided in mortal combat, and what we were looking at were the remains from widespread destruction. There was nothing but rocks all around. We saw the side of a mountain in the distance and even that was just a pile of rocks. We could easily surmise that there must have been a huge upheaval within the bowels of the earth resulting in an outpouring of this stream of rocks.

Our problem was to find our way through this rock-strewn battlefield. The Yamunā ran across this desolate land and every so often warned us to turn back. Swāmi found a small makeshift bridge over the rocks. Every mountain person needs to know how to bridge a span. The military has an elite unit that specialises in building temporary bridges. For the mountain dweller, this skill is a necessity for survival.

We crossed that bridge with great care and concern for our bodily safety. Not too far from there, I found a piece of paper lying under a stone. It was a part of a printed page containing some trigonometric table in English. I tried to glean the life history of that piece of paper, but it refused to tell me anything more than blurting out numbers from that table. It must have seen no point in talking to someone that had no mathematical sense.

Had it been brought there by some government official, or perhaps an adventurous traveller? Someone who got trapped in the snow, or fell victim to a beast of prey? Perhaps someone that got buried under the rockslide that happened sometime ago! And this piece got torn from a book, flew off into the blue yonder and eventually got tired and landed here. Some rock probably told it to 'stop fluttering about and settle down' and weighted it down. That

piece of paper must have waited all this time for an emancipator to arrive and set it free.

I kept that paper for a long time as a memento of the landslide. I do not know what happened to it after that. Had it talked to me at all, I would have put it in a museum. I had found it in the middle of nowhere, where there was no human habitation whatsoever, where the mountains reigned and waterfalls played. How could one not be intrigued by the mysterious appearance of an obviously man-made fragment of a trigonometric table in such a place?

We made our way through that terrain with extreme difficulty. Then we saw the dark and enigmatic Yamunā ahead of us. The river's colour and its quiet flow meant the water was deep there. On our left flowed the river; on the right was the sheer vertical wall of a mountain that dipped into the river. We saw no way around the river and concluded that the only way to move forward was to enter the water. Hugging the side of the mountain, we slowly started wading along the river. We did not have to wade far, but the water turned out to be very hospitable. It coolness touched not only our knees and waist, but moved up into our hearts.

Then came the uphill part of the day's travel. The light faded and darkness spread. We barely made it to the village of Rānāgām.

The principal village deity is Shanaishwar Mahārāj. We went straight to the wooden temple to the deity. I was so completely exhausted that I wanted to stretch out even in that bone-chilling cold.

The village children welcomed us with great curiosity. It is my experience that city children would pester a traveller like me to tell a story. Children of villages close to a city would greet a traveller and then immediately ask for some money. The children of villages back home would barrage us with questions like 'Where are you from? What is your town like? Do you have this? Do you have that?'

Children of these mountain villages will repeatedly ask for threads, needles and 'bindi.' The women and girls around here use

liquid vermillion to make a red dot on their foreheads and then attach a little mica disc or a star they call bindi – a dot. The girls here are crazy about these bindis. If a traveller carries a supply of thread-needles and bindis, he will find a warm welcome in these mountain villages.

We spent that night in a little room in front of the temple. The room had a clay pit in its middle, similar to the wrestling pits in our town akhādās. We slept in that pit. A growling dog kept watch over us. The mountain cows are relatively small –the size of our goats and sheep. The mountain dogs, however, are as large as tigers.

My fatigue had worn off by midnight, and I walked out to relieve myself. Facing me was this high mountain peak slumbering under its timeless blanket of snow and the moon's cool rays reflected from it like from a gilded dome. My unrestrained midnight imagination saw Lord Shiva's head in that mountain peak. A vast forehead, below that, hollows that looked like eyes, a flat nose, an almost nonexistent chin, ears sitting wide apart as if upset with each other… and the whole head leaning sideways as if in need of some rest – rather than standing erect.

The bitter cold had declared a martial law and was ordering me indoors. The majestic vision of that mountain would not let my feet carry me in. The deep freeze of the surroundings was powerless to stop my poetry-thirsting imagination to imbibe the heavenly scenery unfolding in front of me. Up above, Jupiter had established himself in the Scorpion constellation.

Morning came, and the village faithful clad in their long coarse tunics started arriving. Our needs having been met, we hit the road again.

33

Jamanotri

When fog envelops mountainous regions, a traveller frequently sees all kinds of fantastic visions. When a pea soup fog surrounds you, you can hardly see beyond an arm's length and it is not uncommon for people to run into each other.

Then, if the clouds part and the sun's rays can work their magic, the fog melts away and the big wide world shows itself all of a sudden. By the time we look around in awe, the jealous clouds close the heavenly doors again, plunging us back into the milky ocean of fog, where we can barely see past our noses again.

There is a unique pleasure associated with these now-you-see-it and now-you-don't experiences. When the memory sky gets obscured by the dark clouds of oblivion, any attempt to take a stroll down memory lane suffers from the same phenomenon. Some travel memories – due to special curiosity or contemplation – remain clear across the years. On the other hand, many of the larger tracts of land covered by us remain behind that foggy curtain of memory lapse. What the terrain between Rānāgām and Jamanotri was like, and what we saw there is all beyond the reach of my memory now. It is all gone, wiped clean, gone forever. The only thing I remember is, there were times when we had to stop and rest after every ten

steps, but the cool breeze massaged us back into readiness for the next ten steps.

Another picture that emerges from behind that fog is of our rapid descent into the Jamanotri canyon down the mountain on the right-hand side of the river. I also remember opening up to Buwā about some of the chapters of my planned autobiography.

Every river has its guardian mountains on both sides in that hazardous land. But hardly any other river has the good fortune to be protected by the guardians that the Yamunā has in the Jamanotri area. The Himālaya boasts of countless spots offering spectacular scenery. Even among them, Jamanotri stands out with its cool sanctity and awesome solemnity. I have given a word-picture of that in my article 'Yamunārāni' elsewhere. Having once described an experience as profound as that earlier, I do not wish to repeat that in a different way now. It would also be improper of me to keep retelling the same thing over and over.

> *"The Himālaya is the storehouse of grandeur. Scattering grandeur everywhere and thereby reducing grandeur's appeal seems to be the Himālaya's habit. Yet, there is one place in the Himālaya held in awe even by the Himālayan natives. That is the birthplace of Yamunā, sister of Yama – the god of death and justice.*
>
> *The ice melts high above you and cascades down in a huge waterfall. Sky-scraping – no, sky-piercing – trees are all around. The real old ones among them appear to have laid down to rest and are rotting away. The majestic tall mountains are standing guard as if commissioned by the brotherly god of death. The river water freezes and turns into ice, then thaws to revert to ice-cold water. In a wonder of wonders, the hot water spring on the ground erupts to send sprays of boiling water in the air. The ground hisses angrily like a steam engine blowing steam to relieve its internal pressure, and the hot water spray scalds the visitors even in that bitter cold.*

Asit Rishi discovered the source of Yamunā in this miraculous location. Holy as this place is, it is impossible to bathe in the river's pure water. A dip in that cold water will cool you off in a very permanent way. The spring water is hot enough to boil you like a potato. For that reason, bathing pools with mixed waters have been provided.

There is a cave above the hot water spring where one can spend the night. You sleep on wooden boards, but need to keep turning from side to side all night long, because the heat from below and the cold air above are both unbearable."

[Excerpted from the 'Yamunārāni' article.]

I keep thinking of the sage Asit Rishi living in that cold country on the bank of the Kālindi – the dark-complexioned Yamunā. What a figure he must have cut, surrounded by the pristine white icy mountains! How determined and intense the sage's spiritual quest to unlock the mysteries of life – his sādhanā – had to be that nothing less than the extremely harsh environment of the Jamanotri would suffice! How many centuries of the past and the future must the ascetic's visionary gaze have roamed over! He must have thought long and hard about what he could do in service to humanity. There is no way we can determine his invisible influence on our nationalist activities even today.

It is entirely possible that the great sage chose this location because of its hot water springs. I, however, would like to believe that, disappointed by his decision to live in this cold harsh place, Mother Nature shed her tears in the form of these springs. The water here carries no smell of sulphur in it. It just sings to the beat of a constant thump-thump-thump as if coming from a big engine.

We spent the night there with the joy of coming home from an extended travel. We enjoyed every moment of that night, twisting and turning between cold and warmth. Not even an hour was lost to a deep dreamless sleep.

Did nature create such places without any firm intent? We live in an age when nobody dreams any great dreams and, for sure, none strives to make them come true. Today, places like this have no other use but to make the faithful feel good about visiting them, and to inspire overt poetic expressions in some.

Sādhanā, the intense quest for an objective, has deserted our lives. Perhaps that is why there are no true 'seekers' to be found in such places anymore.

34

Over the Uprikot Mountain

A pearl without a hole drilled through it is valued higher than one with a hole. Kālidāsa's Dushyant, upon seeing Shakuntalā for the first time, is reminded of an 'un-pierced jewel.' The shrine at Jamanotri also suffers from a comparison of that nature. The shrine at Badrināth holds a greater fascination for the average pilgrim than the shrine at Kedārnāth. Gangotri likewise attracts far more attention than does Jamanotri. To add to that, the passage to Jamanotri being extremely difficult, people concerned for their safety do not go there.

One result of this [less exposure to the pilgrim traffic] is, the people of this area have remained guileless – even gullible. The Pandās of Jamanotri do not attempt to hide their poverty; they beg for the few pilgrims' patronage without any pretense.

Their diet is quite bland. They use pepper, cumin powder, cinnamon, cloves and dried ginger only for medicinal purposes when someone is sick. This was my first realisation that the condiments we use – to spoil our palate and to torture our stomachs all our lives – were originally used as medicines, but only for serious illnesses. Man noticed that some of these strong herbs worked well to cure indigestion.

However, once this cure was discovered, man must have seen no reason to control his diet. He forgot that having indigestion also meant a loss of face. Only wild animals remain faithful to nature's laws. When we are allowed to fall, why not take the full fall? Man decided to get even with Mother Nature through his extreme indulgence in food, and then using the known cure on a daily basis. The 'indigestion' medicine turned into a habit and, as it became as much a part of food as condiments and spices, overindulgence resulted in indigestion even with the 'cure' incorporated into the diet. Mankind is still puzzling over what to do about it.

The mountain folk here have yet to be spoiled by this cultural sophistication! Pepper, cinnamon and cloves are still medicine for them. Having said all that, I am aware that my travel there happened almost a generation ago.[81] Is it possible that social change and progress have not yet reached Jamanotri society?

We retraced our way to Rānāgām from Jamanotri, and contemplated going over the Uprikot Mountains to reach Uttarkāshi. As soon as 'Uprikot' entered the picture, everyone had something to say about the idea – both wonderful as well as discouraging.

One man said, "Really! Where are you people from? Do you think crossing the Uprikot is a game? You obviously haven't heard our saying, 'The battle of Kabul and the ascent of Uprikot are not for the faint of heart, only for the real heroes." It was only later that we learned the truth of that advice the hard way.

Here we got a chance to observe a mountain ritual – a devotional dance. The facial features of these mountain folk are a mix of North Indian and Mongolian. Their faces look anything but healthy and, appear to be simultaneously ready to laugh and cry. The cold climate requires them to dress in thick woollen clothing. Their feet are covered in thick boots with a woollen design adorning the tops. The whole outfit is very pleasing to the eye.

81 In 1912. At least three generations have gone by since the author wrote this.

These people were dancing in front of a temple. Young and old alike participated. Some people had irregularly shaped thin slabs of stone tied to their backs as they danced. The dance was neither slow and graceful, nor did it contain any fast violent movements. Whenever a pattern of movements is performed repeatedly, it is bound to convey some kind of emotion. This dance seemed as funny as a frightened group of buffaloes endlessly chasing one another.

I kept wondering about the religious sentiment being expressed in that dance. And, what was the significance of the stone slab on the back? I noticed that the temple was roofed with stone tiles just like them. Could it be that bringing a slab from far away and offering it to the temple in this dance ritual was supposed to earn that dancer special punya – positive karma?

There is no attempt made to form the pieces into square or rectangular tiles; the irregularly shaped stones are arranged to line the roof as they are. These people have enough aesthetic sense to make sure that the roof tiles do not look too uneven in thickness or the pattern does not look ungainly; and, the real objective of keeping water and snow out is achieved.

As soon as we started our ascent up the Uprikot mountain, our feet started slipping and skidding. There were occasions to get first hand proof of man being a four-legged animal. We climbed on all fours, grabbing some roots that were sticking out of the ground. Knowing that the day's climb was going to be extremely difficult, Buwā had given us a good breakfast before we started up the mountain. A more apt description would be that we had started the process of placating an angry mountain.

As usual, the three of us were leading the way and our porters were following at a distance. There was no sign of any human habitation on the mountain. The exceedingly beautiful flowers we saw raised the expectation of a Rishi's āshram being in the vicinity. An ordinary jungle would probably have a concentration of one kind of flowers in any spot. Here a big variety of colourful flowers seemed to be woven together in a dense pattern. Who knew nature here was as playful as it was extravagant!

We could have walked miles and miles on that mountain without seeing the smallest evidence of any human settlement, even a single human face!

Of the three of us, only Buwā had mastered the art of getting lost. Swāmi and I usually stayed on course, and Buwā invariably managed to stray from it. When we made our way through the woods, Buwā would always bang his knees or his elbow against trees.

We finally made it to the summit of Uprikot. Snow and ice were all around us. There was no water anywhere, so we broke pieces of ice and took little bites of it. The ice had a chipped structure to it, kind of like in sweets with un-dissolved sugar crystals in them. That ice was fun to eat, but did nothing to quench our thirst.

How could we not get hungry after such a strenuous climb? However, where was our food? We could see in all directions from the mountain top, but Bādaru and Kairāsing were nowhere to be seen. My patience ran out, and I started wondering aloud about where our porters were, whether they were lost or perhaps hurt in a fall. Not one of us even considered the possibility of their abandoning us. For one thing, running away is not in the nature of these mountain people. Moreover, no one would dare violate a contract registered with a government official. The government watches over these people almost as if they are bonded slaves or something.

There is a huge rock perched at the top of that mountain that leans to one side. One could take shelter from rain under that side. People here call that niche a cave. If an old masonry wall leans over one way, would we call that a cave? However, this is the closest to a cave that one can find on that mountain, a place that provides the only shelter from Mother Nature's bombardment from the sky.

Clouds here follow a rather regular routine during these months [around June?]. They spend their nights scattered in the valleys. They yawn and drag themselves awake around eight or nine in the morning. Slowly they slip and slide on their way – slide up the mountain – to reach the top of the valley. Then, after a long introspection about whether to fly or not, they noiselessly spread

their wings and go northwards. They all go north, as if that is where the gathering point for the troops is. There, they seem to discuss their battle strategy until about 3 o'clock. About 3:15 in the afternoon, they begin their southward attack. As needed, some of the clouds rain down on the planned targets below and cow them into submission. The other clouds celebrate these victories and move farther on. A big mountain target like Uprikot would take more than the puny little hail used on the lesser targets. It warranted the big guns and bombardment with hailstones the size of lemons and mangoes. Even the locals shudder at the thought of such hailstorms, because one hit on the head from hail that size would mean the end of the road.

Our umbrellas were among the other things with the porters. Until now, getting wet while we walked was a welcome problem. It helped us cool off from the heat generated by the walking. Getting sick was not even a consideration! All that walking and healthy meals made for perfect defense against any illness. All we needed was dry bedding and clothes for the nights, without which we would need a campfire to dry us.

Even if we had them, I don't believe any of us would have dared to open our umbrellas to protect us from that hail. Not unless we wanted to turn them into sieves!

We approached the 'cave,' and gazed all around one more time. Our guesses about them ran out, but our porters showed no pity on us. There was no sign of them. It was almost 3 o'clock and not safe to stay there much longer.

Just about then, we saw some pilgrims approaching. We could not have been happier to see them. When they learnt our concerns, those poor people gave us flour, salt, a big pan, firewood, and a few other things. They warned us, "Look, don't take too long with your cooking and all. The hailstorms will be here soon and we do not dare stick around. Just bring our pots and things to the next village." They didn't even stop to listen to our reply, and took off.

Buwā quickly made rotlā – the coarse rolled bread. Swāmi and I broke ice to melt it into water. We wolfed the rotlā down with

salt, and started down the mountain path. It was already getting late, and we had to go as fast as we could. I have mentioned before that we had to walk on three feet going downhill. We could not afford to lose that third foot – the walking staff.

When we were close to the village at the bottom of the mountain, we met our magnanimous pilgrim friends. They were highly impressed with our speed. One of them told us about the elderly lady who had slipped and started tumbling downhill. She was falling so hard that everyone thought she was a goner. Luckily, a pilgrim standing down below put his stick between the woman and her sure death. That was the only topic of conversation that evening.

The pilgrims that came to our aid at the top of the mountain, and even trusted us with their property, were not rich people. They were of the class that saved up all their lives for *one* such pilgrimage. This was not a trip for them to enjoy nature's beauty, but the one opportunity to realise their life's dreams. Some poor people work like slaves to save up enough to marry and start a family. Others slog away for thirty or forty years to build a house of their own. People like our Good Samaritan friends put aside all their savings for a lifetime to embark on a pilgrimage like this. They do not care if they return home safely, or perish along the way. They believe their purpose is served either way. When such people unhesitatingly help other pilgrims, nobody finds anything unusual about such sacrifices. The human race has survived only on the strength of man's love and compassion for others. The police and armed forces, and their enforcement of law, have had little to do with that survival.

When we arrived at the village, the dharmashālā, and even the temple courtyard were packed to capacity. A wall surrounded the courtyard, and the inside wall had a raised platform built along a short length of it. Seeing that it was unoccupied, Buwā quickly spread his bedding on that platform.

Trouble erupted immediately. The village folk started screaming at Buwā. We did not understand what they were saying. The reason for their wrath eluded us, and nobody had the time or the patience to explain the problem. Buwā was in a state of shock, and froze. That lack of response from him enraged the locals even more.

The pilgrims were all watching the proceedings. Violence seemed imminent. After a hard day's exhaustion, a physical massage would have been very welcome but must not have been in the cards. One man explained to us that the platform was no ordinary platform but the seat of the Pāndavas of Mahābhārata fame!

I tried to explain that our Buwā was not one to covet even the combined thrones of Indraprastha and Hastināpur, let alone that platform. Assuming the role of a religious bigwig, I turned the tables on those poor folk. I admonished them for their negligent behaviour, indicated by the absence of a tulsi plant, flowers and hedges to adorn the abode of the Pāndavas.

The once-angry and ready to assault villagers turned meek as cows and went on the defensive. "We are ignorant villagers. How would we know what to do?"

I did not eat that night. This was the one and only incidence of going hungry on my part. I had just remembered that it was the day to perform shrāddha rite for my mother's departed soul.

Swami said, "Listen, we have a lot of walking to do tomorrow. If you don't eat now, where are you going to get the energy to walk?"

I told him, "Even tomorrow, I am not going to eat until after we get to Uttarkāshi." I felt the facilities to do a proper shrāddha ritual were not available in that village, nor did I have the desire at that time.

So, we walked the ten miles next morning to reach Uttarkāshi.

35

Uttarkāshi

If you look at the map of India, the Gangā flows largely north to south at first and then mostly in a south to southeasterly direction. In that 1560-mile long course, it would be unusual to see the river flow northwards. There are, however, three such occurrences of a north-flowing Gangā. One of the reasons for Kāshi (Banāras) being a place of such religious significance is that the Ganga flows northwards there. Our ancestors must have found poetic beauty in yet another short northerly stretch of the Gangā among the Himālayan mountains, and named it Uttar-Kāshi – the Northern Kāshi.

Having named it Kāshi, they had no choice but to establish shrines to all the principal deities one finds in Kāshi. So, Uttarkashi has its own shrines to Kāshi Vishwanāth, Bindu Mādhav, Manikarnika, Dattātreya and Parshurām. Everything that is in Kāshi must also be present in Uttarkāshi, albeit at a smaller scale. (One absence that cannot be helped is that of any monkeys! A big presence of yaks makes up for that.)

Uttarkāshi nestles in a wide valley between two big mountains. Many sādhus spend their summers here. And why not? A family man, tied down by his responsibilities, becomes immobile in spite of his natural human tendencies. Whether in summer or in winter,

in rainy season or in the fall, he cannot leave his station in life. His profession may further anchor him to one place.

The sādhus, on the other hand, are homeless and anchorless. Why would they stay in any place all year long? They can be in Amritsar for Diwāli, spend their winters in the warmth of the Rishikesh valley and, come summer, climb up the mountains to Uttarkāshi. The rich and the sādhu-fakirs can partake of this world's joys to the fullest; the only difference being the fakir has not a care, no worry in the world.

The summer weather here is very pleasant. The Himālaya's life-giving atmosphere, the healthy diet of mountain grown wheat and the sweet water of the Gangā, what a combination! The sādhus' physiques acquire such a ruddy glow and healthy appearance that one wants to keep looking at them. They dine at the free food centres, engage in all kinds of philosophical discussions, roam the mountains as they please, and offer their blessings to the pilgrims they meet. If they get hungry between meals, the good mountain women are always around to provide them with snacks.

Some sādhus even run a summer college in Uttarkāshi. Some of the most learned sanyāsis take up residence here, discuss topics of Vedānta, lovingly teach those who want to learn and spend their days in the endless quiet of this place.

We all know of the zoos that sometimes adjoin museums. The tigers and lions there have to put up with much nuisance and indignities heaped by their spectators. Likewise, the sādhus here have no choice but to suffer through the nuisance of the pilgrims. 'Swāmiji, I need to see you.' 'Mahārāj, please give me some words of wisdom.' 'Swāmiji, please accept this offering of nuts.' 'Please bless my daughter-in-law here.' 'Swāmiji, will you please come to our dharmashālā and accept some food from us? The diners are all waiting for you there.' The demands on them and the hassles are unending and unavoidable.

We stayed at the big Kāli Kamliwālā dharmashālā for a couple of days. It was located right on the bank of Gangā, and had a nice

ghāt to descend to the water. The market, a post office and other amenities were all within walking distance.

I had a nice bath in the river, and got busy talking with some sanyāsis. Buwā set out to buy a few things for our further travels from the market. Swāmi was as happy as can be with the proximity of the Post Office, and immediately started writing letters.

In the evening, we went to pay our respects to a sādhu. He had made quite a name for himself as a learned yogi. We also met a Mahārāshtrian dandi – a staff-carrying – sanyāsi. Originally from Pandharpur, he enjoyed conversing with us in Marāthi immensely. He talked to us at length about what the sanyāsis who were permanently resident there were like. He acquainted us with some of the choicest words of the mountain dialect. This sanyāsi was thin as a pencil and, all his teeth had abandoned him, but his sense of humour, his talkative nature and the ability to make you laugh had remained intact.

Well-rested in Uttarkāshi, we proceeded to the village of Bhatwāri. Its original name was Bhāskarpuri, and how it became Bhatwari is anyone's guess. Nobody can deny that Bhāskar – the sun-god – who rides through the sky in his chariot drawn by seven horses is a brave warrior – bhat – but that explanation for the name Bhatwāri seems a bit of a stretch. In any case, there wasn't much to see in Bhatwāri. The place has stayed in my memory only because we decided to leave our excess baggage with a shopkeeper there and go on to Gangotri. On our way back, Bhatwāri was where we would take the fork for the road to Kedārnāth.

Past Bhatwāri, nature assumed an extremely beautiful appearance. The tall statuesque trees, their long and downward-bent branches, the river's expanse, the bathing-sages-like rotund rocks within, and the fragrance-filled air – everything about it was alluringly beautiful.

I vaguely recollect having to cross the Gangā [over a hanging rope bridge] on our way to Satyanārāyan from there. The path went right by a big waterfall in the vicinity, and Buwā and Swāmi could not stop describing it to me. I have no idea where my mind was

roaming during that stretch, but I have absolutely no recollection of seeing it. When Swāmi simply went raving about it on and on, all I could do was to sit and listen with a crestfallen face.

> "... go across the river over a hanging bridge and past the Satyanārāyan temple and a chatti. Merely a hundred steps later, on the opposite side of the Gangā, a huge mass of white water comes a thousand feet down from a tall mountain and plummets straight and with incredible force into the Gangā's lap. The beauty of that fall is impossible to imagine, and must be seen with one's own eyes to believe. ... poetic and highly exaggerated descriptions of this impossibly beautiful waterfall can be forgiven."
>
> (Swami Anand's account in his article 'Uttarkashi-Gangotri')

We had a brief conversation with a pandā in Satyanārāyan. He asked me where we had come from. I said, "From Mumbai." There is no point in going into finer details about places that far away. Mumbai and Belgaum would not make much difference to him.

As soon as he heard Mumbai, he asked, "The place where the Venkateshwar Press is?"

I said, "Yes, that city." What else had Mumbai to offer besides the Venkateshwar Press that its fame would reach all the way up in the mountains here!

He asked with much humility, "Would you please send me a copy of Shanimāhātmya from there?"

I agreed to do that and took down his name and address. As best I can remember, I sent a copy of Shanimāhātmya to that address. I sincerely hope that the book helped him figure out how to avoid the evil influence of the notorious planet Shani.

A little distance beyond Satyanārāyan, we got to a chatti in the village of Gangnāni. There we heard the fame of an aged sādhu that lived across the river. We crossed the Gangā and arrived at a hot water pool.

I saw a nice structure made by the fine particles of lime given off by the pool. This is a characteristic of some [salt-rich] Himālayan streams. If a branch of a tree with thick leaves falls into the water, the water starts having an effect on it. The leaves begin to decompose, and the water's effect gets stronger. The leaves and branches lose microscopic particles and lime particles replace them, keeping the original shape intact. In a few months, the whole branch metamorphoses from its vegetable form into a delicate-looking but reasonably sturdy alabaster replica of the branch. I am sure its detail would render even the ancient Greek sculptors speechless.

Except for the shape, nothing remains of the original branch in this calcified object. Gautama Buddha had not believed in the existence of an 'everlasting' soul, but he did believe in rebirths. Had he witnessed this mountain miracle, he would probably have used the metaphor of these mineral water-born replicas, rather than the lamp metaphor [to elucidate the accumulation of karma without a permanent soul passing from one body into another].

I had once seen a fossilised walnut fruit at someone's house in Lahore. The only difference was that it had iron-ore in place of the lime and, therefore, was heavier in weight than the real thing.

The old sādhu attracted Swāmi's special attention. While Swāmi was engrossed in his conversation with the sādhu, I was lost in my study of that lime formation. On our way back, Swāmi mentioned that the sādhu had been in residence here for thirty years.

Now I had no reason to doubt the truth in that statement. What occured to me was that you see many sādhus living in huts along these Himālayan pilgrimage routes. They somehow get local mountain folk to tell tall tales about themselves to other people. For their effort of spreading a good word about a sādhu, the local people probably get their cut from what the sādhu earns.

How would I know this sādhu was not one of them? Why would people tell us, "A great sādhu lives by the hot water pool across the river. You must go and pay him your respects!"? One man went to the extent of telling us, "My grandfather told me that

he had seen this sādhu in his (grandfather's) youth, and the sādhu looked the same then as he does now!"

Just as newspaper accounts of certain types of happenings seem uniformly fabricated, the tales about these 'yogis' are similar no matter where you go. The universally accepted stories are far easier to digest than something that one has never heard before. Railway stations are built using similar designs. The sadhus' miracles follow a remarkably similar pattern.

There is a small waterfall not far from the center of Gangnāni. The water did come down with some force, but we could not resist the urge to bathe in it. Mustering our courage, we got under the fall… and felt the force of the barrels of water raining down on us. It reminded Swāmi of his school days. 'No, teacher, please don't hit me, sir! I will never do it again, sir!', he laughingly pleaded to his memories. From then on, that waterfall became the 'No, teacher!' fall to us.

Beyond that was the real Gangotri area. We saw a big house made entirely of wood. Around here, all government-owned bungalows and private homes are constructed of wooden boards. The insides of many smell of burning chir gum, because the boards they are constructed from are sawn from chir and deodar trees.

I saw my first yak here – *jhabbu* to the natives. The Bhotia owners of these yaks seemed no more civilised than the animals. The yaks walk ahead like leaders, and the Bhotias walk behind, like followers. These yaks are very good looking animals. The image I remember is of an animal with slightly forward-curving horns and a thick tuft of hair hanging down from its forehead.

The yak ghee – clarified butter – was available for a very reasonable price, except you would occasionally find yak hair in it. For that reason, we heated the ghee and then strained it before using it. The potatoes grown here are pretty big and very tasty. Wheat rotla and cooked potatoes became our daily diet for quite some time.

36

Gangotri

Among the four major Himālayan shrines, Badrināth impresses one with its opulence whereas austerity pervades Kedārnāth's ambience. The grandeur of Jamanotri makes a permanent home in one's heart. Gangotri simply immerses us in its ocean of sanctity and holiness.

On the mountain path to Gangotri, Swāmi had used his long staff to toss a snake into the valley. When I saw the frightened snake stiffen its body as it fell through the air, I could not stop thinking of why it reminded me of the green rubber snake I had bought in my childhood.

The snake melted away from my thoughts as we arrived in Gangotri; in its place rushed in the thoughts of Rājarshis – the saintly kings – and other great sages. How could I not think of the great king Bhagirath and the religious conquests of Ādi Shankarāchārya! Dreaming the inherited dream of bringing water to the flat terrain of Eastern India to provide food for tens of millions of people for millions of years, King Bhagirath must have roamed these same hills and surveyed all these Himālayan streams. Many of these hills are famed to be of the Mother godess's Siddhi Peeths – spiritual centers. It is believed that any tapasyā – spiritual suffering or

extreme austerity – performed at one of these Siddhi Peeths has never gone fruitless!

What must be the desires of Ādi Shankarāchārya when he made his digvijaya – the tour of conquest – and brought educated Brahmins from Southern India and established them as leaders of his newly founded monasteries? Standing atop these peaks, he must have thirsted to spread the principles of Advait – the unity of soul and the absolute – across India to the south, and into Tibet to the north. Buddha, a predecessor of his, had started his religious movement and its waves had travelled to the other side of the Himālaya and beyond. Shankarāchārya had striven to add the belief in God and His scriptures to Buddha's message and spread it to the entire nation. When his opponents called him a Buddha in disguise, they were not maligning him but actually pointing out the discipline and greatness of his work.

The temple of Mother Gangā at Gangotri is so tiny! It symbolised to me the seeds of inspiration or the germination of religious thoughts in the mind of a Rishi in deep contemplation!

While in the Himālaya, I had this desire to offer worship to the Mother Divine, the primordial cosmic energy personified. I asked a Bengali sādhu who had spent some time here to advise me on the proper ritual for that. If memory serves me right, his name was Shāmabhārati or something similar. When he understood my purpose, he immediately responded, "I am sorry, but I am not your guru. Only a guru can explain the proper rites to his disciple. Why don't you ask your guru?"

Some may see a sectarian narrow-mindedness in this. I did not feel that way. It is my opinion that Hinduism has managed to preserve its sense of purpose and uniformity through the guru-shishya – the teacher-pupil – tradition. In this world, where continuous change is a constant, nothing or nobody is going to succeed without that sense of purpose and faith in one's own religion. Just as absolute trust is the critical component in family relationships, that trust or faith

plays a very important role in our religious lives. This understanding made me realise the propriety of the sādhu's reply to me.

There seems to be an unwritten rule about entering a holy site on an empty stomach, and leaving it only after a meal. We followed that dictate religiously.

Walking on red-hot coals is not for the faint of heart. The same can be said about bathing in freshly melted ice water. However, it would be inconceivable to go all the way to Gangotri and not bathe in the holy water.

A college friend had given us a very humorous definition of having a 'bath': 'Bathing is the process of getting all your body wet.' Bathing has nothing to do with cleansing the body or getting rid of the grime and perspiration from it; get the body all wet and your 'bath' is over.

We bathed following that definition, and emerged alive from the water! The river water was turbid with a fine mica and sand mix in it. The river was shallow where I had entered the opaque water, and I had to bend my head to get completely underwater. How was I to know that I was in the company of a round rock deep into his meditative trance? Well, our heads met with undisguised affection! The contact made a big cracking sound, but my body was far too numbed by the cold water to feel any pain. I ran out of the water with my limbs going deaf to my commands and warmed my frozen hands on a bonfire before I could change and wring my wet clothes dry. Only the next day did I feel the raised imprint my little friend had left on my forehead, and realised how affectionate our encounter had been.

We stayed there for three days. We spent most of that time reading and chanting from Durgā Saptashati – the seven hundred verses of Durgā worship, The Geetā, Tukārām's hymns, the Rāmdāsi Manobodh and the Upanishads. We debated at length whether to make the twelve-mile trek to Gomukh, where the Gangā emerges from the snout of a glacier. Had we arrived a few days earlier, we could have walked on the frozen Gangā to reach all the way to its

source at Gomukh. The faithful believe that the Gangā descends from the skies at Gomukh. It is probably the constant drizzle there that the pilgrims think of as the river's descent from heaven. In reality, there is nothing more than an endless expanse of ice at Gomukh.

The Pandās told us, "The only way to get to Gomukh is to take porters with ice-axes and pieces of lumber, and travel along the riverbank. You will need the lumber to build temporary bridges across the various streams that go into the Gangā. Because there is no assurance of those bridges being there for the return trip, you have to carry duplicate supplies of lumber."

They also told us that the land between Gangotri and Gomukh is so sacred that a decree by Shankarāchārya forbids the discharge of any bodily waste there. It was quite clear that the Pandās faced a strange dilemma here. We had arrived with a note from a Tehri government official asking them to facilitate our visit. The Pandas were fearful of our displeasure reaching back to Tehri's official ears. On the other hand, they had no hope of being compensated for any extra service to us. Hence, they wanted to make a show of their willingness to provide whatever we needed, and yet present things in a manner calculated to discourage us from proceeding to Gomukh. They reminded me of the Abhijnānasākuntala episode of the army commander and the court jester conspiring against Dushyant's plans to go on a deer hunt.

After our long discussion, Swāmi proposed dropping the idea of going to Gomukh. I voiced no objection. What we had seen and experienced had been so grand, varied and colossal that there was not much curiosity left to see anything new. Had we decided to go, I was quite prepared to face any hardship or danger we might encounter. The decision not to go did not strike me as missing the opportunity of a lifetime either. I felt no regret. If one can develop philosophical indifference, it is possible for him to display the Geetā-preached condition of a Yogi to whom 'doing or not doing has no meaning'.

I did not miss going to Gomukh, but how was I to leave Gangotri without a heartache? Departing Gangotri was as hard on me as the traumatic parting with my mother every time I left home for college. How many of my ancestors must have made this trip of devotion, and returned home with the inner peace and piety only Mother Gangā can provide? There must have been some who decided not to go back at all.

The Gangā is indeed the mother of all Indians, in whose lap we can all find the peace to fill our lives.

37

The Old Man Kedār

Before leaving Gangotri, we filled our lotās – the little urns – with the holy Gangā water. The Pandās helped us seal them with wax. We started back.

Every returning pilgrim carried the Gangā water urn in his or her hand. That water will reach countless houses and huts in every province of India. An untold number of repentant sinners will feel the soothing touch of Almighty's forgiveness from it. Almost all elderly in their deathbeds will find the final peace from this holy water!

Some sādhus will take the holy water from here as far out as Setubandh Rāmeshwar and then bring the sand from Rāmeshwar to drop in Gangotri, thus binding the entire nation into a holy weave. The Four Shrine pilgrimage is our religious weave that binds the country and society inseparably together.

We retraced our steps to Bhatwāri and took the road to Kedārnāth from there. This road is considered hazardous even by Himālayan standards. You would not see a village or a human being for twenty miles at a stretch. Tall trees are so densely packed together that it is semi-dark even at midday. The rainwater washes the soil away from the trees exposing a network of roots. Any attempt to travel

here at night is bound to prove deadly because there is no way one can walk without tripping on those roots. Obviously, nobody dares travel here at night.

Those roots did come handy when there was a steep climb. Without them, it would be impossible to go up these slopes. The heaps of dry leaves made the jungle even more frightening.

Every so often, where the climb was manageable and the trees had thinned out, the scenery was beautiful. Colourful flowers were all around us giving the illusion of being in the garden of a flower-loving homeowner. You would expect to walk just a little and arrive at a house. Instead, you can walk from morning till evening, and see no village nor home, no human nor a beast. The dreadful effect of total desolation I experienced here will be difficult to match anywhere else. But those brief eruptions of gorgeous flowers felt like enchanted lands in the middle of all that desolation.

Where you do not even see a human face, who would you ask whether you are on the right path? But necessity is indeed the mother of invention! We noticed worn footwear discarded by the travellers frequently along the road. Not seeing those for more than fifteen minutes at a stretch would make us wonder if we were lost. There are travellers who make axe marks on the trees to leave a trail to follow when returning. We believed that our following the 'shoe trail' was a better way to ensure that we were on the path travelled by our predecessors.

When the soles of our footwear started wearing out, Swāmi said goodbye to one of his shoes. He saw a reasonably good ownerless shoe discarded with its worn out sibling, and put it to use as replacement for his own now-departed shoe. In a couple more days, Swami's other shoe missed its lost kin so much that it also declared a strike. Swāmi gave it the precious gift of a good life in the Himālaya, and acquired another partner-less shoe from the road. What were the chances of those two acquired shoes being from even the same province of India?

So very like the lives of men,
A piece of driftwood meeting another at sea,
Only to part again.

We arrived at Chunā Chatti in the evening. On the way – I do not remember exactly where – Swāmi and Buwā had gone ahead, and I had trailed behind. It was getting dark, and I started worrying about finding the road all by myself when some pilgrims caught up with me from behind. It is difficult to describe and something that one needs to experience how good it feels to see human faces in such a situation. We started talking in our instantly-devised-national-tongue.

Suddenly somebody cried out, "Look, bhālu, bhālu, bhālu!" Bear, bear, bear! I was wondering how there could be a bear in this jungle. But, everyone started screaming and running after that bear and I was deprived of the sight of that 'bhālu'.

When we arrived at the chatti, Buwā had warm milk mixed with some turmeric powder ready for me to soothe my sore throat before it developed into a cough. I am of the opinion that such remedies work rather well while travelling.

The route from Gangotri to Kedārnāth goes through Budhā Kedār or the old man Kedār. We came down the long slope the next day to arrive there in the evening. The road had been extremely rough, and an incessant rain had bothered me so much that once we had arrived at our dharmashālā, I refused to go to the temple. I rationalised to myself that it was sufficient that my companions get to see it.

We met some Mahārāshtrians who had migrated up North, at the dharmashālā. Among them was a very cultured-sounding old lady who asked us many questions. She was overcome to see a young man like Swāmi – who had forsaken his parents, forgotten his relatives – roaming around these jungle trails. She wept aloud and said, "How can you people be so callous? Do you not understand how your parents must feel, how lonely and sad your

siblings must be! What do you gain by inflicting pain on yourself in these jungles?"

Let me talk about this constantly recurring experience. Our people are possessed of this overly inquisitive nature. Whether you are travelling on foot or in a train, the moment two people meet, they want to know each other's life story. And the other person relates everything in great detail as if catching up with a long-lost friend.

My eyeglasses would easily lead to the assumption that I was a person of education. They would ask, "How far did you get in your studies?" If I were foolish enough to speak of my college degree, I would pay for it. Why am I not in a job? Why did I not go to law school? How did an English-educated person have enough faith to go on a pilgrimage? That would only be the start, with more personal questions to follow. Who did I have in my family? If I mention any brothers, I would have no choice but to give details of their professions.

But the topic of greatest curiosity would be my marital status. Were I to say I was single, 'Was this non-attachment a childhood infliction or did something happen to cause it later in life?' Now, if I spoke of being married, the inevitable follow-up would be, 'Is she alive?' If I were to reply honestly about her being alive, that would open a whole new can of worms; many uncomfortable questions would be asked. Worse, it would start a long philosophical discussion on whether a married man had the moral right to become a sādhu.

I was not prepared to make such confessions day after day. Nor did I like to be rude and cut the discussion short. So I decided I would bravely tell lies. Before somebody could probe too far, I would let out a big sigh and say, "I was very happily married, but my dear wife passed away. I have left the children with my brother and taken refuge in the jungle." I know that our laws will not punish me for telling such lies. I am not sure, however, that my religious beliefs will be as lenient on me.

People's excessive curiosity causes me such discomfort that I am afraid of asking too many questions of anyone. If I aggravate someone enough for them to resort to falsehoods, I believe that it would make me morally responsible for those lies.

There have been times when, exasperated by someone's endless questions, I have said, "That's enough. If you ask me any more questions, you will only get lies from me." Threatening to tell lies is a much better alternative to actually telling lies. After that, even if you tell the truth, the other person will have difficulty believing it.

If someone asks what is wrong with displaying such an all-too-human trait of inquisitiveness and asking harmless questions, I would have no answer. Why is someone who got irritated by a few questions from a fellow traveller now writing a long-winded travelogue is a question that I often ask myself. I have no answer for that either.

Literature and life seem to have a blood-feud going. An Englishman travelling in a second-class train compartment would spend money to buy a novel and prefer to read rather than turn to a fellow traveller and learn about his life. A novel is going to contain nothing more than a fictional account of some character's life. I write travelogues because I want to. If someone asks me a question, I feel compelled to answer it. If different people ask the same question over and over again, I lose patience. We must not forget, however, that in a largely illiterate society, only communication can fill the void left by a lack of education and literature.

The next day, a Brahmin resident of Budhā Kedār came to meet us at the dharmashālā. Knowing that we were educated people, he had brought his son along for us to test. The boy was fourteen or fifteen. The father said the boy was studying Logic at the time. I had taken a Logic class in my second year of college, and I was surprised that a boy of that age would be studying that subject.

So, I asked the boy a question. The moment he heard the question, he rattled off the entire chapter on that topic. Then

he proceeded to deliver verbatim the guide book commentary on that chapter. He even paused at the appropriate places like a knowledgeable teacher, emphasising and correlating the right terms. It was abundantly clear that the poor kid did not understand a word of what he was saying.

I told the father, "Look, logic is a subject requiring intelligence; it is more difficult to learn than grammar. Grammar is related to language, but logic requires clear thinking. Simply memorising the words is not going to work here!"

The simpleton father replied, "If he can commit it to memory at this age, he will have much less trouble when he is older, and no chance of making a mistake!"

After giving much thought to various systems of learning, I have not been able to rule out completely the value of learning by rote or pure cramming of things into memory. It is a much abused technique, but, if used properly, it does not impede the growth in intelligence. Before the advent of the printing press, the effort involved in writing everything down and then preserving it posed a big problem. It was no surprise that any self-sufficient person, wanting to keep his wealth of education fresh and ready for use, committed such things to memory. That was the way to conserve one's energy. There is no reason to reject that benefit completely.

The following day, we had gone only about a mile when my rain-soaked shoes went on strike. Forget strike, they just resigned! I had brought an extra pair of shoes, which until this point, had ridden on my back. Now it was my turn to ride on that Amdāvādi pair of shoes. But, alas, the shoes turned out to be too small, even for my small feet. Walking in them brought the same pain to my feet that the beautiful women of China had suffered with tneir bound feet. I started soaking them in water before wearing them. The wet leather would meekly conform to the shape of my foot, but exacted a full revenge when it dried even slightly. I suffered through that for the next hundred miles or so.

Then, Swāmi volunteered a pair of his shoes to me. Red in colour, those Dakshini shoes stood out in the jungle and attracted every pilgrim's attention. Their rounded toes were the perfect protection against stubbing my toes. The question was, how was I going to keep those shoes on my feet; rather, how were my feet going to stay in those larger-sized shoes on those Himālayan paths? My feet kept rubbing against the insides of the shoes causing blisters on my feet. I had no shoes I could comfortably walk in. And if I walked barefoot, the rain-washed clean pebbles on the road could not resist showing off their scorpion-like bites.

The pain in my feet dominated my attention. Under those circumstances, I was in no mood to even consider settling down in that jungle. I somehow managed to go on but have no recollection of what we saw along the way.

38

Bhot Chatti

One morning, we had hardly gone any distance when we arrived at our planned chatti stop for the night. I wondered what we could possibly do there for the rest of the day.

I said, "Look, how long can it take to get to that nest-like thing on top of that mountain! Are we going to let that climb scare us into spending the day here?"

I did not know what I was talking about. A straight climb was one thing, we could struggle and pant our way to the top. What we had to contend with here was a saw tooth pattern of hills, where you go up and then down, and up and... The ups would have us panting like a bellows, and the down nothing but a pain in our knees. All that was painful, but what really killed the joy of that whole trip was the mental anguish of seeing all our hard work in climbing up go to waste when we went equally as far down to the bottom of the next hill. As best I can remember, we stomped on nine hills and as many valleys that day. Towards the end, we had real doubts about making it to the chatti at the top. We barely made it there.

The chatti's hut was not tall enough for us to stand inside. We entered the hut like animals on all fours. The floor was completely

wet. We had our waterproof wax-cloth sheet, and my straw mat to sleep on. Somehow we managed to get through that night.

In these travels, the only vegetable available was potatoes. That day, we had no potatoes with us either. There were some small bushes with stems without any leaves on them. The stems curved at the end like a ram's horns. I had seen the mountain people cook those stems and eat them as vegetables. I went out and gathered a couple of handfuls.

I was sure that Buwā would be pleased. Buwā, however, refused to cook those stems. Being a member of the Rāmdāsi sect, Buwā went by the letter of the book Dāsbodh – advice to the disciple. He said it was forbidden to eat an unknown fruit or vegetable. He quoted a verse from Dāsbodh in support of that assertion.

What was I going to do! I arranged those stems in circular patterns on the ground to form all kinds of shapes. I could not enjoy the stems with my taste buds, but my eyes certainly enjoyed the fruits of my labour!

At night we reached Bhot Chatti. The place was packed to the gills. It appeared we may have to sleep out in the open without any shelter above us. In the end, we did get to sleep under a roof.

In that chatti, two men ran a shop jointly. They trusted and tolerated each other enough to be in business together. What they lacked was any head for numbers. They would each contribute equal amounts of merchandise to the shop. The instant they sold anything to a customer, they would split the proceeds equally. The next customer would have to wait until that calculation was made and the cash was split and pocketed by each partner. Between the two, one was just a bit smarter and would ask the customer to buy a bit more or less so as to adjust the price to an easily divisible amount. If the customer did not agree to do that, well, he would not get anything at all. In a small chatti like that, with only two-and-a-half merchants, no customer could afford to alienate even one of them!

Night fell, and the stars came out. We had the pleasure of seeing a clear sky after a long time. The blueness of the sky was something to behold. It is not often that you get to see a sky that clear, and yet, of that deep blue colour. Later in our travels, we saw a similar evening sky on our way to Dwārāhāt, but that spectacle was ruined by the heavy rain that fell. Here, the stars twinkled like diamonds all night long and brightened up the blue Earth below. It would have been selfish of me to keep that joy to myself. I brought Swāmi and Buwā out, and we sat there for a long time talking about nothing but the sky.

Then we heard some commotion inside the chatti. Swāmi went over to inquire; apparently, a Mārwādi man's aged mother had become upset about something and, extremely angry, she had walked off into the dark jungle. Anger invariably triumphs over good sense; but today, anger had overcome even fear. It was difficult to say whether the poor man was affected more by the loss of his mother or by the loss of face in public.

Taking the road to Kedārnāth meant having to cross the Panwāli mountain. Even the tough mountain natives admit defeat against this climb. The locals have tried to portray their difficulties in the comparison: the battle of Kabul, and the ascent of Panwāli. The wording of this adage, of course, varies from place to place.

The next morning, we followed our daily routine, took a deep breath, chanted, 'Now, therefore, the enquiry into the Infinite,' and set off on the day's path.

39

Panwāli and Trijugi Nārāyan

It had rained very hard that day, and we thought of stopping at a chatti a little early – before sunset. There, we saw a stack of large baskets made from a vine that looked very similar to cane. These so-called primitive and uncultured mountain people produce utensils, baskets and other household goods of an astonishing artist.

We had set up our beddings and were looking for a place to start cooking, when the rain suddenly stopped and a golden sunshine filled the surroundings. We were as pleasantly surprised as was Arjuna on the day he slayed Jayadratha. What would people think, if we stopped for the day while so much of it was still available? We gathered our things and started walking. Our poor porters groaned and grumbled but their complaints fell on deaf ears.

Many tasks, thought to be physical in nature, actually are easily accomplished with smart thinking. Work smarter, not harder, the saying goes. Strong men last only a few minutes while grinding flour on a millstone. Frail old women can work at it for hours and produce flour at twice their rate. Swimming requires strength, but efficient use of the limbs gives better results.

The same is true of mountain hiking. If one doesn't rush and follows a steady breathing rhythm, he will not tire. If a camel rider does not loosen up and move with the camel's motions, his whole

body is going to ache at the end of the day. A hiker cannot afford to keep a stiff posture. A day's hike will not tire you out if you learn to keep your knees, waist, and the back free, and step loosely. I must also state that this does not work for obese people.

At the end of that most strenuous hike of our travels, we realised that our hard work had not been in vain. The view that awaited us at the top was something we will never forget.

The innumerable snow-covered mountains, arrayed in a semicircle in front of us, were reminiscent of a mammoth assembly of Vedic Age *Rishis*. From our elevation, we could see at least fifty miles out. Any way we looked, the white peaks stretched into the distance suggesting the endlessness of nature. The endless cover of ice and snow filled the landscape, suggesting its timeless existence – it has been here forever and it will remain here forever. As the ice gets old, it assumes the yellow tint of ivory. A small patch of fresh white snow on that ivory background portrays the pleasing picture of a child playing in the lap of an old woman.

The more I gazed at that entire scene, the more intoxicated I became. The scene turned into a spectacle of an undulating ocean of hills. If we could move even one of those hills to the flatlands back home, our chāran[82] minstrels and poets would sing of it with great pride. Here, nobody would care about the loss of one such hill! India has produced a countless number of saints; the Himālaya is home to an uncountable number of hills and mountains.

This endless land of ice means the defeat of the ever-changing influence of time. Twelve months of the year, the beauty of this place remains the same. The only change in this beautiful picture comes from the colours added by the sun's rays. The presence of one pious person creates the impression of an entire society of God-fearing people; in the same manner, the early morning rays quickly create the illusion of the peaks turning red. At times, the peaks assume

82 Chāran: A community of folk bards.

a saffron hue and appear to be an assembly of all ten varieties of sādhus.

We made a quick descent down the Panwāli mountain and arrived at Trijugi Nārāyan. What a fall it was from heaven back into the mortal world! An incessant and depressing rain had deluged us all along, as if to wash away all the punya we had accumulated in the heaven we had just left. We even tried to go faster by leaving the winding path and going straight down the mountain, though we saved no time doing that.

The ancient temple at Trijugi Narayan has a flame that is said to be burning from time immemorial, kind of like the Parsees' Ātash Behrām.[83] The flame here is believed to be the ritual fire lit at the wedding of Himalaya's daughter Pārvati with Lord Shiva. The flame has been burning ever since!

Later, a sādhu started screaming he had been robbed and crying at the top of his voice in the middle of the night. The whole dharmashālā was in an uproar. It turned out to be a complete hoax. The sādhu had created that whole scene to cause trouble for another sādhu, and timed it to happen in the quiet of the night.

We descended from Trijugi Nārāyan to join the main road to Kedārnāth. From there, we walked along the bank of the river Mandākini and reached Gaurikund, famous for its hot water springs.

The hot water springs of Jamanotri and Badrināth are located right at the shrines. In contrast, you pass such springs on the road to Gangotri and Kedārnāth, much before you reach the shrines. The ones for Gangotri are at Gangnāni, and those for Kedārnāth are located at Gaurikund. The water at Gaurikund did not look clean to us, and we decided to skip bathing there.

The road beyond Gaurikund is notorious for its steep incline. We made the climb and approached Kedārnāth. We went around a

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83 Ātash Behrām: The fire brought to India from Persia by the Pārsees in the eighth century, still burning.

bend in the road, and glimpsed the Kedārnāth shrine's peak. All the pilgrims threw themselves on the ground and prostrated themselves with all eight parts of the body touching the ground. The cries of 'Hail Kedārnāth!', 'Hail to Lord Kedārnāth!' filled the air.

It seems the enthusiasm expressed at that first sighting of the temple is more extravagant than the joy at the sight of the idol within.

40

Kedārnāth

For some reason, most people prefer the temple at Badrināth slightly over the temple at Kedārnāth. To me, the Kedārnāth temple looks older, grander and dignified like a tapasvi. The triangular gable in front, being of the Greek architectural style, draws special attention.

I remember the Head Master of a Tehri school telling us that it is possible to estimate how ancient this temple is from the local Pandas' lineage listings of the succession of [Jyotirmatha] Shankarāchāryas.[84] However, a visual proof of the temple's age is the style of its architecture. Where did the Greek style come from? Is it possible that the Greeks borrowed it from here? This style cannot be claimed as our own. If it was, its examples would have shown up in many other forms and places.

Architecture of the Pandarethan [Shiva] temple in Kashmir raises similar questions. If Ashoka the Great's palace could be of the Persian architectural style, why should we be surprised about elements of the Greek style showing up in the Kedārnāth shrine? We have no reason to believe that our talented ancestors shunned foreign architectural influences. When the weak don borrowed clothing, they only emphasise their own poverty. But, when the powerful borrow something, they appear to be doing a favour by borrowing it!

In some pools near the temple, we saw langotis – long loincloths – with pieces of paper affixed on them. Examination of one of those revealed the paper to be someone's astrological birth chart. It turned out that many pilgrims of advanced age complete their Kedārnāth pilgrimage and leave their birth charts behind. One has fulfilled a lifetime's desire and set eyes on the revered Kedārnāth idol. All life's sins are washed away, and the planets have now withdrawn all their influence on one's life. The birth chart has no further answers for one, so why hold on to that worthless piece of rag?

But, even after beholding the Kedārnāth idol, one is not quite ready to end one's life. He does not want to leave this mortal world, and takes satisfaction in leaving his birth chart behind. There is no limit to the use of alternatives, especially when required to make a sacrifice. The Lord of Abraham was happy to accept a ram's sacrifice in place of his son Isaac's. Pilgrims go to Gayā, and

84 Shankarāchāryas: Head monks of the four monasteries set up by Ādi Shankarāchārya.

instead of resolving to conquer the shad-ripu[85] – the six internal enemies – make a resolution to give up a vegetable or something they do not like anyway! What an ingenious way to declare the pilgrimage complete! The mountain-dweller Brahmin invents the use of five drops of water in his ritual 'panch-snāni' bath, and avoids the pain of a real cold bath. And the civilised nations of today, when they cannot lay their hands on their quarry, satisfy their anger by burning a picture instead in a public square. Poor Manu – the father of humankind – had cautioned us way back, 'one who – although capable of doing one's main duty – willingly resorts to easy substitutes or does his duty only under duress, shall not get the fruits of that deed in the afterlife.'

Although all our holy Himālayan shrines lie at elevations higher than ten thousand feet, they are still below the permanent snow line [18,700 feet for the Himālayan range]. Tall snow-covered peaks are in every direction. We humans look so small in these valleys that even calling us children is not an apt comparison.

The epic *Mahābhārata* contains a beautiful description of Kedārnāth. In it, during the Pāndavas' exile years, Arjuna ventures out here in his quest for astras – enchanted supernatural weapons. Bhima – another of Pāndava brothers – had come out here to look for divine lotuses. In their final journey, the Pāndava brothers and their proud wife Draupadi go past here with heavy hearts.

The thought that the Pāndavas must have seen the same mountains that I was looking at establishes our connection with their age. The moment I think of their final journey north, I cannot but think of Dharmarāj Yudhishthir's loyal dog. In Indra-ruled heaven, as in today's hotels, dogs are not allowed. Indra tells Yudhishthir, "Send this dirty animal back, because you have now gained entry into paradise." Yudhishthir replies, "If you insist, I will go back; but I will not abandon this loyal animal. Even for your paradise, I will not commit such a wrong."

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85 Shad-ripu: The six enemies viz. lust, anger, greed, infatuation, arrogance and jealousy.

We went to the Kedārnāth temple. The streaming sound of conch shell created an unbelievable thrill in my mind. The next morning we went into the temple and saw that the idol was [not the customary cylindrical shiv-ling but] a waist-high stone of uneven shape and rough surface. Every pilgrim gives a full body embrace to the idol, pressing it to his bosom. Centuries of these non-stop affectionate embraces have made its surface smooth to the touch.

If not for the ecstasy of seeing Lord Kedār idol with one's own eyes, no pilgrim can survive the extreme cold of this place.

This one desire has been bringing the faithful here for thousands of years. Many of the historically and scripturally prominent men of India have probably come here, embraced the Lord's idol and felt blessed. Countless ordinary people must have followed them in that tradition and felt pride in their otherwise lowly existence. Whoever it was that chose this place for the shrine and was the first to shower his devotion on the Lord's idol, what kind of person was he! Our infinite respect goes to Lord Kedār and to that unknown devotee, that sage, that Indian ancestor of ours.

Long after sunrise, we went for our ritual dip in the river Mandākini. The riverbed was too rocky to worry about finding a comfortable spot in it. There were too many bathers there to enjoy any solitude either. The desire to be alone is as odd as it is natural. We look for a deserted place to be alone. When we find one, we feel good, 'Great, there's no one here!' We do not realise that the mere fact of our presence there has destroyed the solitude of that place. Is it proper to wish that you, and nobody else, be in a certain place? Is it just?

Yet, it is the real pious that seek such solitude. No, not only the pious have that desire. As one sādhu once put it, "The diseased, the flesh-chaser and the yogi are the types that seek desolate places." How different are their reasons for that desire?

How disappointing is it to come this far into the Himālaya to seek solitude, only to find that the masses have followed you where and when you want to be alone!

Now we had only Badrināth to visit. As the crow flies, it is not far from here. There is only a mountain separating Kedārnāth and Badrināth. If one can go straight across that mountain, the total distance is less than five miles.[86] Crossing that high mountain, however, is easier said than done. It is permanently covered with ice and snow. The end result is that pilgrims are forced to go back the way they had come here, make a big detour to skirt the high mountains and spend nine whole days to reach Badrināth. That is what has given rise to the saying, 'Walk nine days to go but five miles.'

A legend tells us that mountain was not there in ancient times. Only one priest used to tend both shrines and have simultaneous ārati service in both places. Interesting as this legend sounds, it is not to be believed. Some legends have some historical basis but others are only figments of folk-imagination.

The talk of those mere five miles of distance makes me wonder: how long would it be before it dawns on the modern man that the nine-day trek can be eliminated with the help of a nice tunnel through the mountain!

I understand that such tunnels do exist in Italy and Switzerland. Of course, along with the tunnel would come electric light poles. Hotels will come next, and pretty soon all kinds of anti-religion debates! That is what has already started in Kashmir.

Will we be able to protect the Himālaya from this assault of modernism?

86 The author seems to be misled by local gossip. A quick glance at the map would cast a doubt about 'less than 5 miles'. Calculated from Longitude–Latitude data, the distance between the shrines is 22.5 miles.

41

Ukhimath and Tungnāth

We bowed our heads in respect to the Sumeru peak and the Kedārnāth temple and turned around. We went as far back as Nālā Chatti and then took the road to Ukhimath. The terrain here appealed to me because some of the hills reminded me of the hills in my native Mahārāshtra.

The political leaders of New Delhi migrate to Shimla every summer. Lord Kedār goes south to spend his winters in Ukhimath. In winter months, the entire Kedārnāth valley is buried in snow. When summer arrives, the temple priests return to Kedārnāth with picks and shovels and break the ice to clear the road to the temple. These priests claim that the oil lamps that they leave burning when they close the temple up for winter are still burning when they return in summer!

Whether we believe these tales or not, we cannot help telling them anyway. The only purpose this serves is to help understand what is dear to people and in which direction their fantasies take them. Sometimes it is these fantasies that sow the seeds of important discoveries to come about later. For this reason, we must not reject out of hand beliefs that perhaps represent human aspirations.

Ukhimath has a big marketplace. I do not remember why, but we paid a quarter or a half rupee – a big amount at the time – for a

coconut. As I have mentioned in an earlier chapter, coconuts tend to keep recycling along market-to-temple-back-to-market loops. Paper money was invented to reduce the cycles of metal coins through the market. What would be wrong with using paper coconuts for temple offerings? They would at least not rot like real coconuts!

As far as I can remember, the Bengali sādhu Mādhavānand stayed with us until Ukhimath. He had run into some sādhus that must have indulged him with bhāng – the intoxicant made from hemp leaves – as evident from his noticeably high state when he came to visit us. His countenance was grim and his eyes looked jaundiced. He had needed our company on the path to Gangotri, which offered fewer amenities and greater hazards. Now that we were on a major well-travelled road, he had no real need for our company. Besides, he was tired of our daily twenty-five to thirty mile pace. He felt stressed out.

He said, "I need to take some rest. If I don't, I am afraid of a complete breakdown." We bade him farewell without rancour.

A doctor we met at the dharmashālā showed us some dried-up fern leaves. Those leaves were so dry that they crumbled at our touch. But when the doctor put those in water, they turned into fresh-looking green leaves.

This good doctor also told us, "There is a *sādhu* who lives not too far from here. If someone goes to see him, he turns abusive and throws stones at the visitor. Those that *do* get to see him always have something miraculous happen to them. There is something good sure to come about if you visit him." We were not interested in the abuse, rocks, miracles or any possible gain. Hence, we decided to forego that visit and moved on.

The next thing we faced was the climb to Tungnāth. We had managed many climbs prior to this, so we were not exactly unprepared for this one. We were, however, completely unprepared for the thick fog around us. That morning we made beautiful progress but saw nothing of the surrounding beauty. Like fish in the Ocean of Milk, we were going up the Tungnāth mountain range [impossible to see

through the opaque fog]. We stopped every so often and looked all around to see if the door to our fortune showed any crack.

Just before we reached the top, there was a break in the clouds. We could see the summit above us, but thick clouds still shrouded everything below us and as far out as we could see. One should visit this place, if only to experience the joy and pride of climbing above the clouds and looking down at them. Those who have been to Sinhagad, Darjeeling, Mt. Abu and similar places have probably experienced that same euphoric feeling. You feel as if you have left the earth and become residents of an enchanted city that sits atop a cloud, and that you are going to stay up there forever.

In another trip elsewhere, I was crossing a mountain in the afternoon. The sun's rays penetrating the fog below me had created a huge rainbow stretching far into the distance. I had the distinct feeling of sitting on a rug with its seven-coloured border. It should not surprise anyone that experiencing such richness can cause a permanent loss of sanity in some people. Such things have been known to happen. Those who lose their sanity only temporarily, we call poets; those who never get it back, we call insane.

We came down from Tungnāth and the fog, decidedly unfriendly earlier, now promptly dissipated. Did it think we would have cursed it if it had abandoned us while we were still up top?

We had a beautiful view of the Tungnāth peak from Mangal Chatti down below. Only after we had come down from the peak did we realise what grand and picturesque heights we had witnessed.

We moved on with Swāmi in the lead. Buwā and I fell far behind. The rain seemed determined to teach us a lesson, so when darkness came, I decided to stop. We asked about Swāmi and learned that he had gone ahead. I sent someone ahead with bedding for Swāmi and some other stuff, and waited for Buwā to arrive. We spent the night there. That was the only night in our entire trip that all three of us had not spent together.

The next morning when we reached Gopeshwar, Swāmi was chatting with the Mahant – the head priest - of the Gopeshwar

temple. This Mahant was originally from Telanganā - Andhra Pradesh, but had assimilated completely into this mountain society, and spoke just a few words of Marathi. He took very good care of us. Swāmi gave us the gist of his conversations with this man; we learned that once Sister Niveditā had visited this place.

We took the Mahant's leave and went towards the town of Lālsāngā. This is where we would join the main thoroughfare to Badrināth.

Lālsāngā means the red bridge. The town's real name is Chamoli, but because of the popularity of the red bridge over the river Alaknandā among the pilgrims, it is better known as Lālsāngā. The town boasts a market, telegraph office and other amenities, including a hospital.

The travel beyond Lālsāngā was not very interesting. All we saw was the endless line of pilgrims walking like a column of ants. We stopped in the town of Garud Gangā that afternoon. I had a wonderful nap there and that is the only reason I remember that name. I had hardly slept the previous night and would surely have become ill if I had not rested that afternoon.

That is also where I remember seeing the dreaded weed named 'bichhoo' – the scorpion plant [the stinging nettle].

We had been walking for so many days now, that I was now feeling exhaustion creep in.

That evening we reached Joshimath. Just like Ukhimath is Lord Kedār's winter capital, Joshimath is Lord Badrinārāyan's winter abode.

42

The Badri Shrine

After his triumphant tour of theological conquest, Ādi Shankarāchārya gave an organizational structure to the practice of Hinduism. What St. Paul did for Christianity, the sage Veda Vyāsa and Ādi Shankarāchārya did at the macro level for Hinduism. These two great men had hearts bigger than entire continents. Their vision reached centuries and millennia into the future. Confidence, command over language and organization were in their blood.

To ensure the survival of this systematic structure, Ādi Shankarāchārya established four maths (monasteries) in four corners of India – Dwārakā in the west, Shringeri in the south, Puri in the east and Joshimath in the north. He appointed a celibate disciple as head – also known as Shankarāchārya – in each of these four maths, like the Viceroys appointed by Ashoka the Great.

The first Shankarāchārya that he had sent to head the northern math – Joshimath which is also known as Jyotirmath -- was a Hindu acolyte from the south, and that arrangement has continued until today.

Buddhism originated in India, then spread north to Tibet, and from there into China. Joshimath was perhaps meant to be the first line of defense against a southward spread of Mongolian influence into India. In all ancient civilisations, an outpost was set up,

considering the combined strategic needs from commercial, military and religious viewpoints.

The Badrināth idol is in residence at Joshimath during the winter months. That results in the place being crammed with all the Pandās and big crowds of pilgrims. The local artisans sell Badrinārāyan images embossed on copper and silver sheets to pilgrims. They also sell printed pictures. The market here is considered to be of a very good size for this region.

We met this Madrasi acolyte in Joshimath who spoke English. He told us about Joshimath's supposedly celibate Mahant – the head monk – and his offspring! We learned much about the easy income these Mahants derived from the pilgrims' blind faith and how that money was spent. He appeared to know much about the inner workings of the Math. We obviously need another great teacher, another Ādi Shankarāchārya to arise, knock some simple sense into our Hindu society and cut away all the rot in it.

There are four small temples on the four corners of the main Joshimath temple courtyard. The idols inside those little temples looked proportionately carved and quite beautiful. In one of those, there are idols of Shiva and Pārvati in their tribal Bhil disguise. I was captivated by their grace.

We descended from Joshimath and arrived at the confluence of Alaknandā and Dhauli Gangā rivers at Vishnuprayāg. These mountain rivers seem to go crazy when they meet each other. It is not advisable to sit at one of these confluences, because one can be overcome by euphoria and jump in.

We passed a couple of chattis and reached the Hanumān Chatti shrine. This was the site of a major Yagna – sacrificial fire ritual – in ancient times. We chose not to stop there and continued on towards Badrināth.

Our path was crossed by a frozen river in one place. Walking across it was not a trivial task. We used to poke the ice hard with the pointed ends of our walking sticks to see how thick and strong it was. Under the frozen surface, the ice-cold river water continues

to flow. If the ice crust breaks and a man falls in, he will be swept away to an icy grave. If that happens, there is no escape.

Rockslide from above had littered the icy surface with fallen rocks. The ice melts under a rock's weight and becomes thinner. Eventually, the ice gets too thin to support the rock's weight. Plop! Down goes the rock to the bottom of the river. We had witnessed a couple of those inadvertent water burials, and learnt to be extra cautious. We heard the story of a rich man carried in a four-porter jhanpān and the ice breaking under them. The jhanpān and the five men went under and presumably froze to death. The white ice grave readily took them in.

I do not recollect exactly where but do remember walking alongside a river and seeing a good-sized natural ice bridge spanning the river. Whether it was on the path to Kedārnāth or to Badrināth I am not sure. The underside of the bridge had this arch of ice.

And then we saw it! We finally saw the top of the Badrinārāyan temple. Rejoice! Rejoice! We fell on the ground and offered prostrated respects to the Lord with our chests, heads, minds, bodies, speech, feet, knees and hands[87] touching the ground.

No matter how tired one is, this final distance from the Lord disappears in seconds. We felt light as an air-filled balloon and started running. We were cold and dripping wet [from rain] when we entered the town and found a place to hang our wet clothes to dry when the temple bells started ringing, announcing the evening ārati and inviting the faithful to a viewing of the Rājbhog – the feast offering to the Lord.

The bāwās here have a peculiar style of ringing the bells. Two of them bend low at the waist, each of them ringing off the other's beat but not missing his own cadence. One cannot but wonder

87 Sāshtāng, the form of prostration in which eight 'limbs' touch the ground simultaneously.

how they thought of this. We answered the summons and went to the temple. The mass of people reminded me of a beehive swarming with bees. Rather than reconstruct my feelings at the time, the emotion that stormed through my mind, let me quote Swāmi Ānand's words here:

"We just got up and ran to the temple. This was the Lord's door, we were in His perceptible presence – that thought had drawn a huge crowd there. The whole Badri town had gathered there. How can someone be in town and possibly want to waste the unbelievable fortune of viewing the Rājbhog on display?

From that distance, we barely got a glimpse of the idol. Far inside the temple, I could see a big array of flickering oil lamps. I choked up at the sight of the Lord. With a deep sense of bliss, I thought of all the people near and dear to me. What had become an obsession with us, what we had roughed the mountains for and roamed the jungles

for – happily and willingly … we had finally found it!

Tears of joy streamed from my eyes. I felt I had achieved my life's objective. We all felt blessed.

Many others stood there at the Lord's door, felt the same sense of achievement and blessedness. Words of prayer filled the air: 'Let me be at your feet, Lord!', 'Take me into your abode now…', 'Please don't push me back into that meaningless existence.', 'Take me away from here, let me find eternal peace at your feet.', 'My life's purpose is served, grant me the boon of death.' Having stood at His door, having sensed His immediate presence, who among the believers would want to cling to our meaningless lives?

Immediately outside the temple, they were distributing prasād – the sacramental rice offering. Try as we might, we could not penetrate the crowds to get it for ourselves. Finally, we asked a pilgrim to give us a little bit and ate it with deepest gratitude.

Here, at the Lord's door, all are alike. Prince or pauper, rich or poor, Brahmin or low-caste, sinner or virtuous … they are alike. Happy, sad, sick and ailing, the so called low-lifes, low-born, fallen, downtrodden, black, white, Vaishnavites or Shaivites, sanyāsi or homemaker, young, old, women, children – they are all equal. There is no discrimination, no caste, no sect, no mine or yours, no duality, no prejudice, no isms, no quarrels, no Samāji or Sanātani, no reformer or liberator, no East or West here. All are equal here. When children scattered all over the world come to their father's home, they are all of equal stature; there is no favorite, no inferior, no insignificant among them. At the Lord's door, the egotists lose their arrogance. The Lord picks up the small, the insignificant, and seats them on the same level as the mighty. There is no one sinner too small or too big as to miss His gaze:

Call it a river, call it a sewer, dirty water it is all;
Merge'm together and God's holy water it is all.

How can one stand at this door of the Savior of the Sinful – patitapāvan – Lord, and not feel blessed? Who can feel the direct gaze of the Lord and still go away with their petty prejudices about what is high and low, good and bad, sin and virtue still intact? This is where the learned scholars and the ignorant cobbler alike sense the meaning of this oneness, this non-duality, this love, this unity, this fellowship. This is what makes it possible for the richest down to the poorest of pilgrims to, without the slightest hesitation, ask another for a share of the Lord's prasād and then partake of it with all the love.

So, let us remember Him one more time and say: 'Hail the great Lord Badri! Hail the great Lord Badri!"

I wanted to perform one last shrāddha ritual. Shrāddha performed at Siddhapur or Gayā is believed to satisfy the souls of three generations of ancestors. Shrāddha performed while sitting on the Brahma Kapāl rock at Badrināth is believed to grant simultaneous moksha to all of one's ancestors.

The holy books also make it clear that the shrāddha performed here is final. Another shrāddha performed later will actually consign those previously liberated ancestors directly to hell! Really!

[What the Good Books perhaps mean is...] One who performs a shrāddha here is absolved of his obligations to his ancestors. After making many other pilgrimages, when a man goes through this final Himālayan pilgrimage, his worldly bonds should disappear, as should his narrow-minded attachments to his family. When those attachments are gone, so are one's religious obligations to his ancestors.

We perform shrāddha with tender and fond memories of our departed elders. The sentimental bonds break when those departed

souls become a part of the Universal soul. Once we release those bonds of attachment, we must not try to restore them. Here, at the feet of the Lord, if one still thinks in terms of 'mine' and 'not mine', don't he and his fond memories deserve to go to hell? Bigotry, in my mind, is synonymous with hell. The saint-poet Tukārām aptly says:

Free was I once,
'Til I chose to bind myself,
Into this fickle attachment with
'My folks,' 'my dears'

I woke up in the morning, filled a lotā with rice and went to the temple. Ritual bathing is not a problem at Badrināth. The hot water pools are big enough that all can bathe for as long as they wish. I gave the rice lotā to a temple priest who put it with countless other lotās over open stoves by the pools. The rice was cooked and ready when I returned from my darshan – viewing and praying – of the deity. A part of the rice was offered to the Lord and the lotā was returned to me.

A pandā then accompanied me to the spacious Brahma Kapāl sheelā to conduct the shrāddha ritual. I had known these local pandās' dilemma: they had this sworn vendetta going against the Sanskrit language! I had, therefore, prepared and brought with me the requisite mantras. I had also memorised the names of my deceased ancestors and other relatives. I paid homage to all of them and returned with the satisfaction of having met my familial obligations. This was a tremendously fulfilling feeling! I was flying high like I was not even in this world.

I went straight to the temple for one final viewing of the Lord's idol before going back for lunch. The temple was already packed with people. So many people were standing elbow to elbow, jostled by one another, and yet nobody raised a voice, no tempers flared. Everyone was in a state of devotional high, goodwill dripping from every eye.

A young Mārwāri woman, carrying a small platter of sandalwood paste, camphor, almonds, rock sugar, raisins and other poojā paraphernalia, was trying to push through the crowd. Someone's accidental push sent the platter flying from her hands. The young woman just froze as if stabbed in the heart, and then she started crying.

And why wouldn't she cry? Had she not picked every crystal of rock sugar for this, chosen only the un-chipped almonds, hand-rubbed the sandalwood and saffron pastes? She had long planned all that, carried the material with great care all the way from home – all with the intent of personally offering them to Lord Badrināràyan. How much care, devotion and joyful anticipation had gone into that platter! What could be worse than to see it all come apart when she was so close to the Lord? How wretched is that moment? How heartrending is that wail of doom?

Heartbroken, I went close to her, bowed my head to the girl's devotion, and said to her, "Why go through this needless grief, sister? So what if the priest did not physically carry your offering to the Lord's idol? Do you not know that even the stones and pebbles of this soil are sacred, are sanctified? And, these pebbles under the Lord's door? Only He knows how many saints, sadhus and virtuous people have blessed these pebbles with the touch of their feet! I am sure the Lord did not want your offering to go to him through the priest, He wanted to accept it straight from your hands, and so he caused this. You must have more faith in the power of your own devotion, my dear!"

I told her that, and a lot more. The look in her eyes told me she believed what I said.

I picked off the rock sugar and almonds from the ground and handed them to her as the Lord's prasād. I said, "Go home, sister, go home happy. Please do not doubt the Lord's compassion and blessings."

The simple girl heard me out and accepted everything I had

said. She wiped her tears, cried out 'Hail the great Lord Badri!' and left.

She was gone, but she had left me with a gift. She had ordained me into the belief of devotion. She had made me realise the intensity of faith and devotion the feminine heart contains.

I saw and felt the magic of Badrināth more in that simple Mārwāri girl than I did in the idol inside the temple.

43

The Road Back

After visiting Badrināth, some pilgrims continue on to Vasudhārā. There is a waterfall there. Its water is supposed to fall only on the virtuous; the stream will bend to the side if a sinner stands under it. That, anyway, is the belief among the pilgrims.

We skipped Vasudhārā because our porters resisted going there. They were anxious to return home as early as possible. Therefore, we turned around and headed back.

We noticed some people drying the rice prasād from Badrinārāyan in the sun. They will take the dried rice home with them. The Bengalis will take it to Bengal; the Punjabis will take it to Punjab; and the Mārwāris will bring it home to Mārwār and eat it. The extremely rite-conscious Mahārāshtrians will distribute it to friends and relatives back home. It will reach Madrāsi homes as far south as Rāmeshwar.

Just as the Shāligrām [from the Gandaki river in Nepal] is not a stone, and the sacred thread – janoi – is not just cotton, this dried rice is not food. It is a sacred gift from the living Lord. It purifies our bodies. It cannot turn unholy. It is as pure as fire. We were going home carrying that sacred prasād.

Again, we noticed the poisonous bichhoo shrub all along the road. The Marāthi name for it is 'khājkooi.' Some call it 'khājkoli' too. Touching its leaves causes severe itching and burning.

A pahādi – mountain person – told us a humorous tale. A Christian missionary observed a Vaishnav devotee worshipping a Tulsi shrub. The Missionary laughed at this, picked off a few Tulsi leaves and crushed them in his hand. The smart Vaishnav decided to do something about it. He saw a bichhoo shrub and laid prone himself on the ground, and said, "This is a bigger deity for us than Mother Tulsi." The Missionary discovered the truth the hard way.

These humorous put-downs are present in every province. If not Missionaries, they target followers of some other sect or religion, even atheists. These jokes can make fun of anyone.

We passed Lālsāngā, and reached Milchoudi. The Tehri state territory ends here. Our contract with the porters was only for the Tehri territory. We settled the wages we owed to Bādaru and Kairāsing, and they left us with heavy hearts.

They said, "You people walked so fast that we saved some days and our food expenses. However, we are exhausted from the pace you set. We will go home now, load up on ghee and milk, and recover. And we plan to take the next year off from this portage work."

The contract with porters required us to feed them only on the days we took off from our travels to rest. The porters considered a meal of rice-lentil khichdi a feast compared to their daily wheat diet. They didn't mind walking an extra ten miles after such a feast.

We got a new porter from there. He was meek as a lamb and a simpleton, but he talked a lot. When the sādhus talk about themselves, they refer to themselves not as 'I.' They say 'this body does this,' 'this body went to …' and so forth. Our porter referred to himself as 'my soul': 'my soul' is tired, 'my soul' needs some sleep, 'my soul' does not like to go in the dark…!

We stopped at a place called Ganai. Here we got some sleeping space on the long and narrow porch in the back of a shop. Our tired bodies had hardly had a short installment of sleep when singing started somewhere in the neighbourhood. It sounded like quite a group of mountain folk had gathered.

From the sound we guessed the singer to be a young man. He had a good voice and the refrain was sweet too. For a while, the singing just enhanced my sleepiness, and I was pleased. But the song did not go beyond the first line. The same line was repeated over and over. Half hour, one hour, a whole two hours went by but the singing was stuck at that one line. I got bored, then irritated and then absolutely restless. The refrain penetrated my skull, my head started spinning but the singing did not stop.

But, who could we complain to? Who would I pick a fight with? I don't know when sleep finally claimed me.

I later thought about the song that sounded so sweet at first, and later irritated me so much. Do the immortal gods in paradise tire of the same luxuries year in and year out, and wish for death to liberate them? A Tukārām abhang came to my mind:

Even the immortal gods in paradise
Long for a birth among us mortals.

Immortality is the sentence to a life without end in prison, says a quote from Swāmi Dayānand Saraswati. I was not a heaven-bound immortal longing for death. All I wanted was for morning to arrive so that I could leave Ganai for good.

Good wheat flour was hard to get on the road, and invariably had fine pebbles mixed in. It finally affected my digestion and I developed a fever, but stopping here was not going to solve that problem. Feverish or not, I walked. I also freely consumed wonderful yogurt made in wooden pots from raw milk. Instead of being harmful to the stomach, it actually helped cure my diarrhoea.

44

Dwārāhāt

Late one evening, I arrived at this place at the foot of a mountain. I had stopped to dry my rain-soaked clothes and fallen behind my two comrades. A shopkeeper informed me, "Your companions have gone ahead to Dwārāhāt and have asked that you meet them there."

I listened to the shopkeeper and looked up at the sky. It was an unusually beautiful evening sky but darkness was on the rise. I was debating whether to stay there for the night or keep going to join my friends. I thought the wiser decision would be to spend the night. But, the next moment, this crazy idea took hold of me, 'No, let us forge ahead; this walk at night will be a new experience.'

Leaving a dumbstruck shopkeeper behind, I started walking that late in the day.

It was a full-moon night. But, even a new moon night could not have been any darker. Dark clouds covered the entire sky. I could hardly see the road. The heavy afternoon rain had washed out some sections of the road, and there were potholes everywhere. I took quite a few falls, ran into things, and sprained my knee. The shawl wrapped around me showed greater affinity for the thorny trees than for me, and expressed its desire to stay behind. Somehow, I managed to placate it and walked on.

As more time went by, the more I regretted my decision. I should have stayed back! After a while, I started wondering if I had already walked farther than the distance I still had to go. If I decided to turn around when I had only a quarter of a mile further to go, wouldn't that make me look like an idiot? With that thought, I would walk some more, and try to rethink my position. I had my clock tucked away at my waist, but how was I going to read the dial in the dark?

Then it dawned on me to stop my thought clock and to just walk on. The jungle ran out before my patience did, and I reached Dwārāhāt.

Dwārāhāt is a market town. But it was almost nine-thirty at night, and the whole town was already asleep. How I would find Buwā and Swāmi was a big question. What if I knocked on a door and someone barked at me? Even if nobody barked, what would I ask them? Where is our Buwā? Or Swāmi?

I thought of Wordsworth's poem 'The Idiot Boy.' Betty Foy, the mother's friend, is very sick. The unwitting mother puts her idiot son atop a pony and sends him to fetch the doctor from the city in the middle of the night. The boy forgets all about his assigned task, and he and the pony go for a cool sun stroll in the woods! When the boy and the pony do not return, the poor mother goes out to find them and the good doctor. She goes and wakes the doctor up and asks: 'O Doctor! Doctor! Where's my Johnny?' What would the poor doctor know about where Johnny was? 'And, grumbling, he went back to bed!'

If I had gone on a door-to-door search for Buwā and Swāmi, I would have ended up with the same result. I finally thought of something. I started chanting the Upanishad verses I knew – solemnly, but at the top of my voice – as I walked.

Flashes of lightning would let me see the surroundings, but then darkness would return with a vengeance. When I reached what seemed to be the end of the road, I saw flat smooth ground ahead of me. Could it be a tennis court, here, in the middle of the road?

Perhaps the road goes through it. No, it couldn't, I decided. I picked up a stone and threw it on the 'tennis court'. The stone reported back that it had landed in water, and immediately sank. I expressed my sincere gratitude to my stony benefactor. So I continued on to the right and resumed my chanting.

I went a little further down that street and heard a window open above a shop. Swāmi called out, "Is that you, Kaka?" I replied, "Is that you, Ānand?"

Swāmi immediately came down with a hurricane lamp in hand and took me in. Buwā had cooked dinner and fed me affectionately with tears glistening in his eyes.

How I found my way in that dark night became the topic of a big discussion. Is there ever an end to talks of love and concern! If my tired body had not issued a decree, the night would have ended before our talk did.

I got a good view of the 'tennis court' lake in the morning. It had a coating of moss, its sprinkling of reddish brown and green reminiscent of the inside of a fig.

We set out again. We were close to the end of our trip. Walking in that muggy valley was becoming unbearably torturous, and we started looking for hilltop paths like the mountain folk do. That entailed walking up and down the hills but was certainly preferable to walking in the oven-hot valleys.

Finally, we were back in Almorā. Even the familiar old places looked different to us now. In those two months or so, we had gained some priceless experiences, developed new outlooks and had drunk from the awesome grandeur of the Himālaya. Our vision had changed drastically. No wonder that previously familiar objects appeared different to our changed eyes now!

One pilgrimage had ended; we had met our objective. Buwā and I took Swāmi's leave and proceeded in the direction of Haridwār. But the seed of an Amarnāth pilgrimage had been sown. That obsession would not let us rest. We wanted to behold and pay our homage

to the beginning-less Lord Shiva's Amarnāth form. We wanted to visit the Kashmir of 'heaven-on-earth' fame.

The universe is endless, time and dimensions are endless, the relationship between cause and effect is endless, and the original Supreme Being is endless. Why should we expect an end to man's desires, the objectives he sets for himself and the schemes he devises to meet those objectives?

45

The Benefits

When we want to entice someone into doing something, we tend to emphasise the benefits – true or exaggerated – that one would derive from doing it.

We know that children do not relate well to the real, especially the long-term, benefits of most things. For that reason, it has been a long-standing practice the world over to tell them what they like to hear – true, false, anything at all, as long as it will convince them to do what we want them to do. Nobody seems to think twice about how that practice degrades the value of truth.

And, once that line is crossed, why stop at anything at all? With time, the usage of falsehoods only rises in the same manner as the intake of intoxicants. Perhaps the cure for this malady is hiding somewhere in those very falsehoods.

Our religious rituals and vrats (resolutions e.g. to fast or to renounce something for a duration) seem to be in a furious competition to spotlight their own benefits. The deliberate lies that we see in today's advertising have nothing over the blatant falsehoods used in our ancient literature. The series of promises with 'those desirous of male offspring shall get them' and 'wealth-seeker shall acquire wealth' cannot end easily. How can it stop short of '…

shall have all the worldly pleasures and moksha?' You can have your cake and eat it too!

If I wanted to state the benefits of a Himālayan pilgrimage in that fashion, then this is what I would say:

He that goes on such a pilgrimage shall beget at least a hundred sons with each of the sons living to a ripe age of hundred; he shall have a palace of gold; he shall remain young no matter how many wives he takes; he shall have the simultaneous and sweet approvals from the nymphs of heaven, the Himālayan siddha yogis, and the eternally young celibate sages like the four Sanat Kumars.

I shall, of course, keep to myself my opinions on what havoc such benefits will wreak in a man's life.

If those are the benefits one would get out of such a pilgrimage, surely the benefits of reading a travelogue of that pilgrimage should be even greater. Therefore, anyone that reads this travelogue shall acquire wealth. One that adds this book to his collection shall never have thieves target his home. Whoever donates copies of this book to Brahmins, students and especially to harijan untouchables shall have the eternal blessings of the book's learned author and its publishers. The mere reading of the book shall earn the reader all the punya of going on the pilgrimage itself... et cetera, et cetera.

No enticement is complete without the element of fear added to it. Hence, whoever speaks ill of this book, or harbours doubts about its contents shall have this happen to him and that happen to him. And, anyone casting doubts even on the benefits stated above shall spend at least four eons burning in hell – the Raurava Naraka, no less! What is more, the reader that skips this chapter on the benefits shall forfeit all the benefits of reading this travelogue.

Seriously, even atheism at its worst has not done as much harm to Hinduism as has the practice of using benefits as enticements.

In order to avoid that trap, I want to take a different path in my statement of benefits. I want to tell my readers what I gained from this travel. While doing that, if I can also give them the probable

benefits they may derive from this type of travels, I will consider my job done.

First, I must admit that I did not adequately prepare for a journey of this scope. Any activity performed without the proper amount of preparation yields minimum results. Education being the activity to prepare one for life, an educator like me should never be so unprepared. Today's educators teach others but care little about incorporating those very teachings in their own lives. I myself do not remember making advance preparations for anything in my life. That is why I feel so inadequate in this attempt to write about these benefits.

Anyone setting out to travel in the Himalaya or anywhere in Northern India must have a working knowledge of Hindi. I did not have that.

One must have at least some basic knowledge about the history and the geography of the area one is going to visit. I did not have that either.

If you are off on a pilgrimage, you must know something about the religious significance of those holy places. If not, you are going to miss out on the enjoyment of the poetic beauty of those shrines.

What I did possess by way of preparation were these things. I was very rich in enthusiasm. I had a weak but reasonably hardy physique. I had all the time in the world, and was mentally quite prepared to live a life without any firm direction. I knew how to cook. I could swim. I was a dreamer and enjoyed exploring my dream worlds all by myself. I had the temperament to be one with nature. I held the firm belief that unselfish endeavours invariably yield something good.

My biggest other preparation was the companionship of my loving friends.

Vedānta books mention two different mindsets among devotees – that of newborn kittens, and of baby monkeys. The kitten is totally helpless, just lays with its eyes closed and waits for its mother to

arrive and carry it somewhere. The baby monkey is quite self-sufficient. It keeps an eye on where its mother is, the direction from which danger may approach. When threatened with any adversity, it quickly reaches the mother and clings to her. Man has a mix of both of those mindsets. I considered my possession of both traits in good measure as another element of my preparedness.

When a Hindu travels to the Himālaya, it is more than likely that his principal intent is religious in nature. Most Hindus cannot think of the Himālaya in any other context. However, what constitutes religious intent? Every Hindu will believe that merely setting one's feet there and walking on holy soil is a blessing in itself. If that were not so, the blind and the deaf will not undertake that pilgrimage.

When a Westerner travels, he carries as many implements of convenience as is practical. His first priority will be to work hard to watch his weight, improve his strength and maximise his bodily enjoyments. He will carry cameras to capture and preserve his cultural heritage. He will take detours to see or learn what others may have missed and thereby try to be the first at something.

In contrast, we believe that the more hardships one suffers, the greater the religious benefit of a pilgrimage. Removing the layers of dirt accumulated by one's body through overindulgence or laziness is considered a form of sādhanā – spiritual discipline. I believe that we have elevated the pilgrimage to a very high level by adding this element of hardship. If pilgrims do not accept these hardships, or if they lose the intense desire to work hard to achieve their objective, our shrines will not retain their purity, their holiness. For sure, the natural beauty surrounding those shrines will suffer. Suffering hardships and voluntarily sacrificing various comforts has the effect of enhancing a person's physical, mental and spiritual appetite. It helps make life's desires and joys become ethical and pure. Overindulgence and art being enemies, a certain amount of hardship is necessary for man to cultivate the enjoyment of finer things in life. Only the one that has some control over his senses can truly enjoy art.

The second big benefit of a religious pilgrimage is the opportunity to meet a Satpurush – a god-realised man of virtue. Such men do not usually move into a location because of its established importance as a shrine. Rather, a Satpurush is attracted to a site by its extraordinary natural beauty or an event of great religious significance having occurred there and settles there. It is by his presence that the site becomes a shrine. If many such holy men choose to settle in one place, or if some luminary declares the importance of that site, it soon joins the ranks of major shrines. That starts the comings and goings of other saintly people. The events associated with each shrine stay alive by word of mouth among the pilgrims. This is the way religious sentiment awakens at such locations and then spreads elsewhere.

Such places then spontaneously turn into centres for discourse and exchange of religious ideas.

Common people's religious sentiment provides facilities for uninterrupted spread of knowledge. Religious ideas are put to the test, and this friendly clash of ideas helps develop a merging of minds at the highest intellectual levels.

I have seen all these benefits exist in the major shrines.

The true pilgrims in general remain celibate during their pilgrimage and, as much as possible, do not tell lies nor cheat anyone. This must count as a big religious benefit. Having experienced the satisfaction of pure life once, man is sure to consider continuing on that path after returning home. Some may make a firm resolve to do exactly that. The religious belief, sentiments and customs certainly get a boost. Not only that, one's thinking becomes much more liberal as a byproduct of the pilgrimage. When a Madrasi Brahmin goes to Kashmir, or a Kashmiri Pundit goes to Mahārāshtra, they see the drastic difference between the most orthodox people there and back home. This opens their minds to change.

This kind of generosity and flexibility is the biggest gift of education.

There are two principal areas of education: psychology and sociology. A person is educated if he has gone deep into both these areas. When delving into psychology, he turns inward, goes deep within and examines himself. When he dabbles in sociology, he studies his surroundings, observes the causal relationships at the societal macro level and the varied behaviors of people as a whole.

Going within and getting to know the Antaryāmi, the Supersoul within us, is the study of Adhyatmashāstra – the field of theology. Looking at the world around us, and grasping the concept of the Cosmic Divinity is to delve into Srushtishāstra, the field of cosmology. Taken together, the two fields constitute Dharmashastra, the field that defines ethical conduct of life. A deep contemplation of that is the only real education.

The ever-satisfying aspect of any travel is to see nature's play first-hand. The tall mountains and the deep canyons, wide rivers and even wider beaches, all pervasive trees and their resident birds and animals – these are the verses of Mother Nature's beautiful poetry. Even the flat terrains that are totally devoid of hills and mountains put their beauty that varies with the seasons on display. There are those arid places with not a drop of water around, where deer chase illusory rivers of water and finally drop dead of thirst in the hot sun. However, that cruelty of nature in no way reduces the beautiful wonder that a mirage is. If there is real moisture in the air, a rainbow is bound to show its majestic arch.

If an ocean makes its appearance, you cannot fail to notice its breathing, in the guise of its ebbs and tides. Extending that metaphor, the question that arises is: if the oxygen we breathe purifies our blood, what is it that the ebb and tide purify? When we observe the ocean's butterflies undulate atop the waves, we almost hold our breath for the flowers to sprout from the waves. In addition, the waves that show the rise and fall of the ocean's heaving bosom leave patterns behind on the beach when waters recede.

Sunrise and sunset are the ever-fresh, ever-new poetic recitals that never end. The beauty of these twin twilights changes from country to country, from place to place, from season to season, from moment to moment and even with the mood of the clouds.

How about those clouds? Clouds are the unceasing pilgrims of the endless sky. The sky does not ever change, and the clouds do not ever stand still. Caught between these two, the poor sun has to play a new role every second. No matter how many jewels the Earth produces, the clouds have made it their life's mission to show her how poor she is. The only entity that even tries to compete with the clouds is the snow on the slopes of the Himālaya. These clouds, though, can deflate the ego of the Himālaya, and of the Earth herself, by erecting mountains bigger than even the Himālaya. The only saving grace is that trees grow on top of the mountains, whereas the only thing that grows atop a cloud is just another cloud.

No matter how much a traveller gets around, and how independent and unattached he becomes, his stomach always goes with him. When it is afternoon and his stomach starts to growl, he finds a hospitable hut with food far more attractive than any poetry. Even otherwise, the village huts have their own charms. Those huts, the animals' manger, various farm activities, the weaver, the potter, the goldsmith, the carpenter, the blacksmith and their businesses – each have their individual poetic charms and a combined big one. The river has its charm, and the bridge has a very different charm to it.

Wandering from one rest stop to another, the traveller gets to witness nature's play as well as diverse folk life. Every place has a different language, different customs, different architecture and different style of apparel. If the traveller stops to examine the local needs and ideals that are the basis for those differences, he can gain an invaluable education. The deeper he digs into it, the more he begins to identify an underlying unity in all that diversity. It is gratifying to see the many different ways in which the human heart grows.

Folk life is the finer side of the otherwise coarse nature of human understanding and behaviour. Man must change his lifestyle with the changing environment. Even if man does not want to think about it, the daily clash with nature will force him into such thinking. What his head refuses to tackle at first, time will eventually bring to pass. A neat lifestyle that is fine-tuned over a long period cannot fail to impress you with its spontaneous charm.

Since all these qualities are integral parts of folk life, people feel very good about them. Suddenly acquired wealth makes one feel uneasy. This folk culture is not anything that sprang up overnight. Its simplicity is a matter of pride and dignity to its members. Who can estimate the value of the lessons we can learn from examining the hitherto unknown wealth hidden in these folk cultures?

Our lives reflect much more Indian history than is recorded by our historians. We get a good glimpse at the history of the places we travel to. Then again, this Himālayan region is a nation within the Indian nation. It must have witnessed waves of civilizations and revolutions come and stop right here. Here, echoes from the [Mahābhārata era] Kuru–Pānchāl civilization to the [modern era] Tibetan culture overwhelmed by Col. Younghusband's attack must ring loud even today. We are indebted to Sister Niveditā for drawing our attention to the history of this part of our country.

Travelling through this Himālayan region can teach us much from the geographical and geological points of view. The Himālaya is what has protected us from the assault of cold north wind and violent cultures blowing southward from Russia and China. Without the Gangā, we would have had none of our affluence. Without the Himālaya, our tall-as-Himālaya Aryan civilization would never have flourished.

Travel is the only unstoppable tool to get a true picture of our country's soul and its vastness in one sweep.

The Vitality of Life

Is man an inherently mobile creature, or is he stationary by nature?

It takes very slight reflection to recognise that both tendencies exist in the species today. The transformation from his caveman beginnings to the present day state seems to indicate mobility to be an inherent characteristic in man. The search for sources of food and water is the natural instinct common to all living beings. In his early hunter state, man had to roam constantly. [The Mahābhārata contains references of the forest-living Pāndavas depleting the game animals in one area and moving on to a new forest.] Later, when man learned to domesticate animals, he had to be on the move for newer pastures to feed his herds. And then, some people had the brilliant idea to grow food where they were, instead of having to go where the food was. And man stopped wandering in search of newer forests and pastures; he became a farmer and started tilling the earth. This foray into agriculture was one of the biggest changes in human history. Man's mobility decreased. Life became stable and more civilised. The stationary life made man far more productive, perhaps at the cost of some of his vitality. Progress in one particular direction almost always comes at a cost in another.

But the greedy man wanted the best of both worlds. He observed that nature had made the vegetable kingdom mostly stationary, but then had also created the butterfly to actively facilitate the transfer of pollen between sexes. He developed a system under which one class of people stayed mobile and toiled, to allow another class of people to settle down and live a stable affluent life. This arrangement seemed to work well.

The arrangement had greater impact [among the ancient Hindus] in two of the four different phases of life – the Āshrams. When the student phase ended, a young man would hit the road to see the world. Only at the end of that pilgrimage was he allowed to marry and to start a family. After [twenty five] years of that static family phase, it was time to brush off the rust of that easy life; and the scriptures beckoned "Enough of the easy life, time to get back to nature." Returning to one's origins provides a sort of joy, a restful charm – much like what is experienced by children returning to their mothers' warm laps after a long day of fun and games. The man who had left his jungle life to become a family man and a citizen, in returning to nature to prepare for his final phase of renunciation, experiences the same feeling of warmth as those children. This move also constitutes upward progression. One [360 degree] turn of a screw brings you back to the starting point – only, one step up.

The ancient arrangement above also prescribed frequent pilgrimages during the householder phase. That way, one would see a variety of local conditions and ways of life, cultivate new friendships, and dust off some of the cobwebs of his static life.

But even if the societal rules laid down by the religious thinkers had not required it, this arrangement would have naturally found its way into human thinking. Much of what eventually gets formalised as religious practice has its origins in natural or God-given inspiration. Strictly natural urges may lead us [morally] upward or downward. The so-called divine inspirations are nothing but natural urges that take us higher. The urge that leads us to the Divine is divinely inspired.

This would explain why independently developed religions mostly teach similar [social] arrangements. Japan's Shinto and Bushido prescribe pilgrimage as does the Vedic Āshram arrangement. It has a place in Islam which calls for every Muslim to go on a Hajj [the obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca]; a trip to Jerusalem's holy soil clad in jute is a fond dream of many devout Christians.

[Among the Hindus] pilgrimage was considered the principal activity for those who had forsaken their worldly life and possessions [as sanyāsis]. But, a certain amount of travel was a duty required of various classes of people [as defined by Vedic Hinduism].

A young brahmin would travel [to his guru's āshram] in search of education, later to participate in yajna-kshetras [ritual offerings to the fire-god], on frequent pilgrimage except in the four monsoon months and, rather than sit out his final days of life, was asked by the scriptures to proceed in a north-easterly direction for as long as his feet would carry him!

As for the kshatriya [a member of the ruling class] man, how would he protect the farms from wild animals if he did not go hunting? And, why would the farmers pay the king a sixth of their produce if he didn't? A king worth his salt would let his horse loose and conquer the lands that the beast wandered into.

The vaishyas, the merchant class, were traders almost by definition. Their lives were deemed meaningful only if their caravans of loaded camels crossed the jungles, travelled from state to state and transported merchandise from here to there and from there to here. Indian literature is replete with stories of young men leaving their newly wed wives behind to take to the seas in their quest for commerce.

The Buddhist monks were great missionaries. They ignored the taboos against ocean-crossings and took their religion to far-flung corners of this world, and also inspired foreigners to travel to India. One of Lord Buddha's teachings was that a monk should travel about as fearlessly as does a rhinoceros in the jungle. After adopting Buddhism, Emperor Ashoka gave up his territorial expansion and

visited different parts of the country every year to spread Buddhism in every direction.

Indra, one of the two principal deities in Rigveda,[88] is quoted saying 'providence walks with the one that walks,' [and by corollary] it sits out on those that sit idle. Following that inspiration, the cowherds walked, sailors sailed, the devout went on pilgrimages and the ascetics walked to the life's end. Every live being in this world walks. When man finally tires of walking, he refuses to stay immobile and chooses to leave this world.

But where did the inspiration for travelling come from? No, not from the stars wandering the skies! That urge must have come from the incessant and lifelong flow of rivers. That, too, seems to have worked in two ways. In the very early days of human history, some people travelled eastwards to find where the sun rose. Others went west to see where the sun set for his nightly rest. In the same manner, some people became curious to see where the endless swell of a river's water came from and travelled upstream to the river's origin. Other equally curious people went downstream to find out where the flow went, what it emptied into, and to experience what else awaited there. The cowherd going upstream to the origin and the water-farer boating downstream to the ocean are nothing but brethren.

An ancient poet suggested that the proper way to enter the ocean is through the river's mouth. When you investigate how much ocean travel was undertaken by that poet's descendants, the result is utter disappointment. It is unclear whether the Vedic era water-travels of Tugra and Bhujyu were river voyages or ocean voyages. Buddhism's Jātak Tales mention Vaishya merchants plying the oceans from Java-Bali-Siam seas on one side to the entire East coast of the African continent on the other. But, there is no record of any of their accounts of voyages written by them, certainly nothing comparable to what Pliny [supposedly] wrote in his Periplus.

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88 The Rigveda (ऋग्वेद) is the oldest of the four Vedas, the canonical sacred texts of Hinduism.

If those that travelled to Java gave up any hope of returning home, is it surprising that their following generations would forbid any ocean-crossing voyage? And what was the excuse used for such a prohibition? Well, in alien surroundings like those abroad, it would be very difficult – if not impossible – to observe the dietary laws and behavioral requirements of the [Hindu] religion. What an ingenious approach to avoiding such a predicament! Overexposure to the bright sun caused this man to vomit bile. With solemnity befitting the occasion, his doctor advised, "Dear man, it is a grave mistake to venture out into the sun. Just sit under a roof, and I will dare that vile stuff to even show!" Afraid that someone might cast lustful looks on their women, rather than confront a culprit if that ever happened, some men chose to cover their wives head to foot and coop them up deep inside their houses. That such people would also declare ocean-crossing a sacrilege and keep to their own country is entirely understandable, and... well, good for the rest of us. These cowardly people have even admonished the sanyāsis to "... avoid going into territories where the cuisine is not tasty, where the populace does not provide food to you with devotion and where violence abounds." "Do not marry your daughter to one struck with wanderlust," they have written. Self-preservation above all, first and foremost!

So we followed all those golden rules and suppressed the best of our God-given instincts. But did we really succeed in preserving all that we wanted to preserve? We banned ocean voyages to avoid contact with all the evil that lurked abroad, but we did not elude it. That evil stormed its way into our domain and took away our freedom, our commerce, our education. They settled in and took control of our destiny. Indra was absolutely right. Providence sits out on those that want to sit on their haunches and do nothing.

The truth is that when the life force within us weakens, the fear of unknown takes hold in our hearts. When that force is strong,

and the heart is young, man finds it impossible to resist the call of that same unknown. To chase after the unknown, to experience its thrill, to conquer it and to convert it to knowledge — there is no bigger happiness, there can be no bigger fulfilment in life. Scientific discoveries are one type of conquest over that unknown; physical travel into unexplored territory is another.

When someone climbs into a horse's saddle, his heart swells with the feeling that he has absorbed all of the mount's strength. The proximity to that much energy strengthens man's persona to a commensurate extent. Holding the steering wheel of a car running at eighty miles an hour makes the driver feel that he is the one moving at that speed. The personal satisfaction – the feeling of accomplishment – one derives from running an organization or government comes from the thought 'All these people relate to me. I have the freedom to exercise this much power. I have been able to harness the energy of all these people to create one enormously powerful entity.' Character enhancement, development of energy and control of one's destiny are great sources of satisfaction for any man. Thanks to his travel, whatever land expanse he acquires through his eyes, whatever distance he treads, whatever experience he gains, a man's life becomes that much richer. Wealth stored in any vault is external and, therefore, something to worry about being stolen. The knowledge that he acquires, the culture he cultivates and the strengths he develops through experience become his internal wealth that are not things to worry about losing. On the contrary, those additions create the capacity in one to bear life's other burdens. When setting out to travel, one has no choice but to give up attachments with some things and conveniences. Whether a person or a cloud, one must shed weight to travel. The aforementioned knowledge, culture and abilities acquired through travel become so ingrained that they are not a burden nor a dependence.

The knowledge acquired through travel is different from that learned from today's education system in precisely this regard. What is taught in today's schools is not learned by the student through

its use and therefore remains undigested and difficult to retain. It is my belief that if the children are taught through travel rather than at school, the process on the whole will be less expensive and far more fruitful.

The more one travels, the more one learns and the smarter one gets. He learns to be patient and develops tolerance for a variety of things. Eventually, all those skills add up to a comprehensive view of society and its behaviour. Travel is the opportunity to experience discomfort in a royal fashion. A traveller expects hardships during his travels, and does not necessarily think of them as a reflection of his economic circumstances. He is more likely to see them as an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of the realities of life.

Seen that way, travel is a great tool for personal development. On the other hand, it is a very fulfilling exercise of one's patriotism. Whatever part of the country we visit, explore and identify with, that is the part we develop a special feeling for and form a bond with. We experience pride, we develop reverence for it. After returning from our visit to a certain province, do we not pay much more attention to the newspaper accounts of happenings there?

Travel, however, must not be undertaken solely with the purpose of gaining what one can at the society's expense. If it is done with the intent of squeezing every last drop out of it, one is likely to realise very little of the benefits of travelling mentioned above. There is a huge limit to the gains from any activity performed with strictly selfish motives. When a pilgrim or a social worker goes on the road, he or she is accompanied by many other forces – both internal and external. A selfish person intent on sucking the world dry will invariably tend to overindulge his one senses or another. All our senses have legitimate needs. But, when indulged beyond reason, the sensory yield falls off drastically and the revelation of its shallowness is inevitable. Enjoyment derived from any sensory indulgence has its limit. Mankind has seen cases of excessive indulgence, and... also its consequences.

But man has yet to see an end to the biggest benefit of travel – self-development that comes from experiences that touch one's heart. The variety of those experiences and their influences remains ever-growing and ever-fresh. The less one desires, demands and expects to benefit from travel, the greater are one's cultural gains from it. When a devotee goes on a pilgrimage, he gets to know his own self better and better, his development gains momentum and his rapport with the universe grows. Watching the ever-developing universe, the greed-driven man wishes, 'I want this world to be mine, only mine.' The devotee, on the other hand, prays : 'Let me be of service to this world; let me become an infinitesimal part of it, lose my identity and become one with it.' One cannot ascend to any truer or greater heights in life.

If someone asks me what the benefits of traveling are, I can answer that question with ease. But, I am often asked what the reason for my last travel was. Now that is a different question altogether, and one much more difficult to answer. Eating, sleeping, displaying fear, marrying someone... why man engages in these universally common behaviours is not an easy question to answer. Most people will simply say they do these things because they cannot help getting into these activities. We certainly like the benefits we derive from them, but exactly what prompted us to get into those acts we cannot say. Some unstoppable urge from within propels us and we have no choice but to give in. It must be nature's intention that what is simply necessary for life's sustenance must not be left for man to analyze and decide upon. So whether to take a bath or not can be a matter of man's choice. But nature does not allow man to decide whether to sleep or not. When the Land of Nod beckons, man obeys without challenging it and enters its realm.

For one whose nature-given urges remain uncorrupted, the internal motivation for travel remains strong. A bull, smelling moistness after the first rains, tries to dig up the soil with its horns

to get to the source of that smell. At the first chance of a trip, man experiences that same natural urge to start walking. If someone asks where he is going, his reply may well be, 'I don't know where I am going. All I know is I want to be on the move, I want to walk, go places, not sit still. My eyes thirst to see new places, my whole body is hungry, my feet want to walk. That's all I can tell you.'

It may be that this urge to be on the move is stronger among hill-dwellers. Denizens of flat lands, however, are no less afflicted by this wanderlust. People that ferry Ganges-water from the holy city of Varanasi in the North all the way to Rāmeshwar at the southern tip of India, and then carry sand from the ancient bridge there back to Vārānasi and Haridwār are not all hill people.

The vast majority of my childhood memories are about our travels. I remember making the trip from Shahpur to Belgundi and eating guavas, mangoes and karamadā there. We would go from Sātārā to Jaranda or Parali and visit Rāmdās Swāmi's monastery and the Hanumān temple nearby. From Belgaum, we would cross the Tinai Ghāt (mountain pass) and get a spectacular view of Goa's incomparable stretch of green forests. Or else, we would take the jungle trail of Amboli Ghāt to Sāwantwādi's Motitalāo and check out the colorful shellac being applied to woodwork. We took a ferry boat to Kārwār and built sandcastles on the ocean beach. We travelled to Pune and paid our respects to the deities at the hilltop Sangam, Pārvati and Chatushrungi temples. We would catch a glimpse of the medieval India by visiting the small feudal states of Miraj, Jath, Mudhol, Sāngli and Savanoor. We would take immense pleasure in watching mammoth cows and oxen jumping and dancing on the shore of the river Krishna.

Those were the cultural influences on my childhood. A bullock cart's flatbed covered with hay and sometimes a soft thin cotton mattress; chimes from the bell around the bullock's neck breaking the quiet of the night; my eyes, charged with the duty to stay awake and watch out for would-be-robbers, dozing off at times; when I awoke with a start, the stars twinkling above with the admonition,

"See how we stay up all night!" That whole scenario is woven into the memories of my childhood years.

I have never needed any reason or excuse to go traveling. I had the perfect opportunity to go to England with Gāndhiji. So why didn't I go? Why did I end my Himālayan pilgrimage without continuing on to Kailās? Why did I cancel, at the last moment, my plans to travel to Russia by way of Afghanistan? Or when am I going to visit Java, Bali, Thailand and Sumatra? When am I going to act on the invitation from Mauritius? I think these are all legitimate questions that people ask me. One must have a legitimate reason for not going somewhere. But, why is it necessary to have a reason to go? Does anyone ask a river why it flows without stopping? Wouldn't we have a real cause for wonder if it did stop flowing?

The question why I went on my Himālaya trip and what I gained from it is addressed in various parts of this travelogue. I believe that this desire to visit the Himālaya is a natural instinct for all Hindus. Sindhu, Gangā, Brahmaputrā and their other friends are all daughters of the Himālaya. Every [Hindu] river-worshipper will eventually find time to visit this grandfather and to get pampered!

The majesty and grandeur of the Himālaya are far greater than the wealth of all the great empires of this world put together. Himālaya is our Supreme Lord — the greatest source of the world's affluence. And yet, the Himālaya remains unspoiled, detached, tranquil and in a deep trance. Anyone that has gone there and succeeded in suffusing his heart with the Himālayan presence has truly conquered his life. Our endless respects go to such a person.

Pune [India] Dattātreya Bālkrishna Kālelkar
May 27, 1938

GLOSSARY

(In the order of appearance, grouped by chapter)

History

Sābarmati Āshram: Located on the bank of the river Sābarmati in Ahmedabad, the Āshram was home to Mohandas Gandhi between 1917–30. It served as the centre of the Indian freedom struggle in that period.

Sister Niveditā (1867–1911): Born Margaret Elizabeth Noble, was an Anglo-Irish social worker, author, teacher, and disciple of Swāmi Vivekānanda. She set up a school for girls deprived of even basic education and worked to improve the lives of Indian women.

1 The Decision

My body moves forward...गच्छति पुरः शरीरं धावति पश्चादसंस्तुतं चेतः from Kālidāsa's play *Abhijnānasākuntalam*.

2 Prayāgrāj

Vaisākh: the hot summer month in the Indian Lunar calendar.

Bāwal: Acacia Arabica, a hardy thorny wild-growing tree.

Vithobā: The form of Krishna or Vishnu that is the most revered deity in Mahārāshtra.

Gangā: The river Ganges. In Hindu mythology, it originally resided in Heaven, and was brought to the Earth to provide salvation to some souls by dousing the ashes of their bodies burned by a curse.

Yama: the Hindu deity of death.

Saraswati: The Hindu goddess of knowledge, music and the arts.

Tri-river confluence: According to Hindu belief, Prayag is the location where three (not two) rivers meet; the river Sarasvati, the 'invisible' third, is believed to flow in a subterranean channel and join the Yamunā and the Gangā.

Haridwār (the Gateway to God): one of the seven holiest places in Hinduism.

Kurukshetra or Brahmāvart: the site of the battle of Mahābhārata and the birthplace of the Bhagvad Geetā.

Bodh Gayā: The shrine in Bihar where Buddha is supposed to have attained enlightenment under a banyan tree.

Gayā: A town in Bihar, India. The Vishnupād temple contains a 'footprint' of Lord Vishnu incised into a block of basalt marking Vishnu subduing the demon Gayāsur by placing his foot on the demon's chest.

Samudragupta the Great : The ruler of the Gupta Empire from 335–380 AD.

Pandās: Local Brahmin priests that perform various religious rites for the devout Hindu pilgrims. Different pandā families claim to be the official priests for Hindu families from all over India and can produce written records from the past to prove such claims.

Nāgā Bāwās: Members of a militant sect of monks that go around practically nude and cover themselves with ash.

Shrāddha: Hindu rite intended to nourish, protect, and support the spirits of dead ancestors.

The United Provinces: Territories of Agra and Oudh

3 Vārānasi, The Eternal City

Kānpur well: During the 1857 'mutiny,' the rebellious soldiers are rumored to have slaughtered some British soldiers and dumped them into this well.

The sword brandishing General: Brig. Gen John Nicholson who was fatally shot at the Lahori Gate during the recapture of Delhi in September 1857. A large statue of Nicholson with a naked sword in hand was erected in Delhi, but was taken down after Indian independence and later moved to Northern Ireland.

Ahalyābāi: Ahalyābāi Holkar (1725–1797), queen of Indore, built temples and free lodgings for pilgrims all across the country.

Bilipatra: Bael tree (Aegle marmelos), with green leaves growing in three-leaf clusters, offered in worship to Lord Shiva.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780–1839) was a Sikh ruler of Punjab.

Sant Eknāth (1533–1599), a prominent Marāthi religious poet

Purva-Mimānsā: A theological text providing correct interpretation of the first part of the Vedas which prescribes how ritualistic karma is to be performed.

Vedānta: The second part of the Vedas, broadly broken up into two schools of philosophy – Dwaita ("of two" or Dualism) and Adwaita ("not-two" or Monism) in their concepts of Ātman (Self) viz-a-viz Brāhman (the Infinite).

Dwaita: Dualism, Adwaita: Monism. Both refer to ātman and brāhman.

Vaiyākarani: A Sanskrit scholar specialising in Vyākaran (grammar).

Nyāya: the school of Hindu philosophy dealing with Logic (inference).

Āryasamāj: An organisation seeking to rid Hinduism of fictitious beliefs and rituals, and reverting to the basic teachings of the Vedas.

Central Hindu College: A boys' school started by Annie Besant. It merged with the Banaras Hindu University upon its establishment in 1917.

Annie Besant: (1847–1933) English Theosophist, educational reformer, advocate of home rule for India.

Brahmachāri: Acolyte (literally, one celibate from birth).

Kāla Bhairav: A fierce, frightful manifestation of Lord Shiva, with a dog as his mount.

4 The Legend of Gayā

Tapasyā: A focused effort at austerity and an excruciatingly harsh penance in restraining physical urges and in actively pursuing a higher purpose in life. The expected result is the grant of a boon from a deity.

Yamapuri: The place where Yama, the god of death, brings the souls of the dead and decrees whether each goes to heaven or to hell.

Dharmashilā: See the full story later in this chapter.

Ādigadādhar: The mace-carrying Lord Vishnu.

5 Bodh Gayā

Peepal: Ficus religiosa, a large tree. Its heart-shaped leaves are used in the rites to worship Vishnu.

Nerañjarā: Also Nairañjanā (in Sanskrit), a small tributary of the Gangā.

Māra: The demon in Buddhist mythology, who tried hard to seduce Gautama away from his quest for enlightenment.

Nachiketā: The boy from Hindu mythology who matched wits with Yama, the god of Death, and learned from him the path of realising Brahman i.e. emancipation of the soul from rebirth.

Dhruv: The child in Hindu mythology who, denied a seat on his father's lap, did hard penance to Lord Vishnu and was granted his own immovable position as Dhruv Taarak, the North Star.

Siddhārtha: (Sanskrit) He who achieves his objective.

Kheer: (from Sanskrit ksheer - milk) A sweet dish similar to rice pudding.

Chankramana Shrine: The Jewel Promenade Shrine marks the place where the Buddha walked up and down while in meditation.

6 Belur Math

'Sujalā, sufalā, malayajasheetalā': Words from a famous song from the novel Ānandamath.

Bipin Chandra Pāl (1858–1932): A famed nationalist politician, renowned orator, journalist, and writer.

Aurobindo Ghosh (1872–1950): Nationalist leader, philosopher, ascetic.

Khudirām Bose (1889–1908): A young freedom fighter who went to the gallows before he was nineteen.

Kanailāl Dutta (1888–1908): Another young revolutionary who was sentenced to death.

Ānandamath (1882): The famous Bengali novel by Bankimchandra Chattopādhyāy that became synonymous with the struggle for Indian independence from the British. Banned by the British regime.

Devi Chaudhurāni: Another Bankimchandra novel, published in 1884.

Rāmakrishna Paramahamsa (1836–1886): A famous mystic, vedantin, influential figure in the Bengali Renaissance. His followers believed him to be an incarnation of God.

Swāmi Vivekānanda (1863–1902): Rāmakrishna's disciple and the founder of the Rāmakrishna Mission. Considered a major force in the revival of Hinduism in modern India. An intellectual of the highest degree, he introduced Vedanta and Yoga to the West and established Hinduism as a major world religion.

The World Parliament of Religions: Chicago, September 11, 1893.

'Purity of food essential…': Chhāndogya Upanishad: आहारशुद्धौ सत्त्वशुद्धिः।

Kāli: The Hindu Goddess of time and change.

Brāhmo Samāj: An influential socio-religious movement in Bengal.

Māyāwati Math: A branch of the Rāmakrishna Math.

Samādhi: The departure of one's soul from the physical body as a result of total and intentional cessation of all bodily activity, including breathing.

M: The pen-name of Mahendranāth Gupta, a disciple of Rāmakrishna Paramahamsa.

The Gospel of Sri Rāmakrishna: English translation of the original Bengali Sri Sri Rāmakrishna Kathāmrita, a five-volume work recording the long-term daily interaction between the ascetic and disciples.

The Udbodhan House: The residence of Sri Shāradā Devi; also the publishing office of Udbodhan, the monthly magazine started by Swāmi Vivekānanda.

Shāradā Mātā: Shāradā Devi (1853–1920), wife of Rāmakrishna.

Namo Nārāyan: I bow to the Lord.

7 In the Hallowed Land

Chaitanya Mahāprabhu (1486–1534): A Hindu saint and social reformer in eastern India including present-day Bangladesh. Chaitanya was a proponent for the Vaishnava school of Bhakti yoga (loving devotion to Krishna).

Malik Kāfur: The Muslim general who plundered much of India in the early fourteenth century.

'Ayi bhuvanmanamohinee': One of Rabindranath Tagore's most famous lyrics set to music by himself, addressing the motherland as 'O world enchantress'.

Rāmprasād Sen: An eighteenth-century poet who wrote 'Rāmprasādi' hymns to the Goddess Kāli.

8 Ayodhyā – Rāma's City

Ādi Shankarāchārya (788–820AD): A Hindu theologian and philosopher, he consolidated the doctrine of Adwaita – the unity of the Soul and the Whole. He brought organization to the Hindu monastic orders, and the four Maths – monasteries – he founded continue to be the principal seats of organized Hinduism.

Kumkum: Powdered turmeric with a bit of slaked lime added turns it red. Used for ceremonial pooja rites and by married women in the parting of their hair.

Rāma's Reign: रामराज्य has become synonymous with the ultimate in benevolent rule of law and order.

Emperor Ashoka (304–232 BCE): The Maurya ruler unified almost all of the subcontinent and left the first tangible evidence of Buddhism in his thirty-three edicts on stone pillars and boulders throughout today's Pakistan, India and Nepal.

Lankā: Present day Sri Lanka. The island abode of the demon Rāvana invaded by Rāma to rescue Seetā, his consort.

Mathurā and Vrindāvan: Locations in the life of Krishna.

'He is the truth...': सत्यं ज्ञानमनंतं नित्यमनाकाशं परमाकाशम् The opening verse of Govindāshtakam by Ādi Sankarāchārya.

Garhi: Fortress

Tulsi *Rāmāyana*: Rāmacharitamānas, the epic Hindi poem-scripture written by Tulsidās (1532–1623 AD)

'Ayodhyā, Mathurā, Haridwār...:

अयोध्या मथुरा माया काशी कांची अवंतिका।
पुरी द्वारावती चैव सप्तैता मोक्षदायिका: ॥

9 On the Way to Almora

Charles Darwin (1809–1882): The English Naturalist who theorized that in the species' struggle for existence, 'Natural Selection' and 'Survival of the Fittest' play a big part.

Pān: Betel leaf stuffed with crushed areca nut, lime paste, etc.

Sopāree: Areca nut

Trishanku: A character in Hindu mythology who tried to ascend to heaven in his mortal body. Helped by the sage Vishwāmitra but opposed by god Indra, he is eternally suspended between the earth and heaven.

Khichdi : Rice and moong bean splits cooked together.

Tejbal : An herbal tree also known as Prickly Ash or Toothache tree.

10 The Mountain Supreme

Bhartruhari : A sixth or seventh century king who after learning of his wife's infidelity, the legend goes, renounced society and adopted the solitary life of an ascetic.

Pashupatināth: Lord Shiva. The Pashupatināth temple in Nepal is one of the major shrines of Shiva.

Chandragupta Maurya (340–290 BCE): The unifier and the first true Emperor of the Indian subcontinent.

Ādi Shankarāchārya: See chapter 08 glossary for Shankarāchārya. Ādi means the original, the first.

Prasthānatrayi (the three points of departure): the Upanishads, the Bhagvad Geetā and the Brahma Sutra.

Avadhoot: A highly evolved yogi.

Soul of the gods, emperor of the mountains: देवतात्मा नगाधिराज (Kumārasambhava by Kālidāsa).

Sati: Shiva's first consort who, insulted by her father, immolated herself.

Kumārasambhava: The bard Kālidāsa's classic describing the birth of Kārtikeya, the Hindu war-god.

Bhagirath: The king who succeeded in bringing to earth the holy river Gangā from the heaven.

1857: The first large-scale fight for freedom from British rule; the British dubbed it 'the Sepoy Rebellion.'

11 Bhimtāl

Jalandhar: Jullundur under British rule.

Garhwāl and Kumāon are subdivisions of the Indian state of Uttarākhand today.

Pancha-Prayāg: The five locations of confluences of the Alakanandā river with five other rivers and the shrines located there. The fifth and final confluence with the Bhāgirathi creates the river Gangā.

Pancha-Kedār: The five Shiva temples to be visited in a prescribed order.

Pāndavas: Characters in the epic Mahābhārata, the five brothers set out in the Himālaya to ascend to heaven. Four, along with their wife Draupadi, perished on the way. Only the eldest reached the goal alive.

Chār Dhām: Literally 'the four holy abodes' – Gangotri, Jamanotri, Badrināth and Kedārnāth.

Bānabhatta: A seventh century Sanskrit scholar; author of Kādambari.

Kādambari is believed to be the first Sanskrit novel, and among the earliest of all novels. Kādambari and Mahāshwetā are characters in the story.

Vālmiki: (circa 400 BCE), considered to be the poet harbinger of Sanskrit literature, and the author of the Hindu epic *Rāmāyana*. Its first verse is supposed to have sprung from his lips in which he laid a curse on a hunter for shooting down the male half of a bird-couple immersed in passionate lovemaking.

12 The First Lesson

Panchatantra: A collection of interwoven animal fables teaching ethical conduct of life with anecdotes. It is believed to be written around the third century BC and has been widely translated into world languages.

Maināk: In Hindu mythology, mountains originally had wings. King of gods, Indra, cut the wings off, of all but Maināk, who hid at the bottom of the ocean and kept his wings but never came out of the water.

Mayāsur: The demon architect in Mahābhārata who built an illusions-filled palace for the Pāndavas.

Khes: A rectangular piece of cloth, folded lengthwise and kept on one shoulder.

Final release: Moksha or liberation from the cycles of rebirth in Hinduism.

The mind is ...:

मन एव मनुष्याणां कारणं बन्धमोक्षयोः।

न कश्चित्कस्यचिन्मित्रं न कश्चित्कस्यचिद्रिपुः।

आत्मैव ह्यात्मनो बन्धुः आत्मैव रिपुरात्मनः।

Muktesar (Mukteshwar): A hill-station town with a panoramic views of the Himālayan range.

Octroi: Levy imposed by certain local governments on goods entering their jurisdiction.

Kākā: Uncle. The author was lovingly addressed as Kākā. Ji is the suffix used to show respect.

The state of 'absolute nothingness': निर्विकल्प समाधि.

13 Almorā

The United Provinces: A province in British India; present day states of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarākhand.

Missionary College: Ramsay College affiliated with Calcutta University.

Tānāji, Sinhagad: Tānāji Mālusare, Chhatrapati Shivāji's general, who, at the cost of his life, retook the fort later named Sinhagad (the Lion Fort) after him.

Shabdakalpadrum: A classic Sanskrit dictionary.

Brāhmo Samāj: A very influential religious reform movement started in 1828, the Brahmo Samaj is a community of people assembled for the worship of the Supreme Being in spirit, as opposed to idolatry.

Vedānta: Literally, an appendix to the Vedas, an inquiry into the Vedic teachings.

Tantra : A religious belief system that has Shakti as the principal deity and regards the universe as the divine play of Hers with Lord Shiva. Its characteristics are spiritual practices and ritual form of worship.

A sinner though in the past...:

अपि चेत्सुदुराचारो भजते मामनन्यभाक्।

साधुरेव स मन्तव्यः सम्यग्व्यवसितो हि सः॥ The Bhagwadgeetā

Guhak, Shabari: Rāmāyana Characters of the Shudra castes that Lord Rāma treated with affection.

14 Khākhibāwā

Circles: Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous essay from his 1841 publication 'Essays: First Series'.

Ekādasi: The eleventh or the 26th day of the Hindu lunar month.

Bāti: Unleavened whole wheat bread, resembling a bun but with a thick and crispy crust.

15 Padambori

It is better to...:

धर्मार्थं यस्य वित्तेहा वरं तस्य निरीहता।

प्रक्षालनाद्धि पंकस्य दूरादस्पर्शनं वरम्॥

Brahmā, Vishnu and Mahesh: The Hindu Holy Trinity of The Creator, The Maintainer and the Destroyer.

Bāti: Whole-grain wheat bread, unleavened and baked in a charcoal grill.

Tapasvin: An ascetic, practitioner of austerities as a means to spiritual advancement.

Rājayogi: A practitioner of Raja Yoga which deals with controlling thought-waves rather than with Asanas and breath control practiced by the Hatha Yogis.

Vyāghracharm: Sitting mat made of a one-piece tiger skin.

'Comprehend one must of action…':

कर्मणो ह्यपि बोद्धव्यं बोद्धव्यं च विकर्मणः।
अकर्मणश्च बोद्धव्यं गहना कर्मणो गतिः॥ The Bhagwadgeetā 4:16

'One that perceives bad in doing…':

कर्मण्यकर्म यः पश्येदकर्मणि च कर्म यः।
स बुद्धिमान्मनुष्येषु स युक्तः कृत्स्नकर्मकृत्॥ The Bhagwadgeetā 4:17

16 Slaughter of Cows

Motee, mouktik (Sanskrit): Pearl.

Bhairavghāti: Further explained later in the chapter.

Bacteriological Institute: The Imperial Bacteriological Laboratory established in 1889 in Pune, moved to Mukteshwar in 1893. Its charter was to conduct research for the protection of Indian livestock from diseases like rinderpest.

Rinderpest: An acute, contagious viral disease, chiefly of cattle; from German 'Rinder', cows/oxen, + 'Pest,' plague. The author probably had Rinderpest confused with Surra caused by the T. evansi virus and very common in India. It is an acute disease in camels and horses, and chronic disease in cattle and buffaloes.

'It is for naught': न च तत्प्रेत्य नो इह। The Bhagwadgeetā 17:28

17 The Dharmashālā

Pushpak: The aircraft Lord Rāma rode in Kālidāsa's Raghuvansha.

'Make the earth bow under him': धीरोद्धता नमयतीव गतिर्धरित्रीम् Uttararamcharit 6:10

Shakuntalā: The heroine of Kālidāsa's Abhijnānshākuntalam

'Not openly erotic, nor totally veiled': न विवृतो मदनो न च संवृत्तः Abhijnānshākuntalam 2:11

Bilhan: The eleventh century Kashmiri poet noted for his satirical wor*ks*.

'The thirsty can hardly enjoy partaking of poetry': पिपासितैः काव्यरसो न पीयते।

Paisā: One-sixtyfourth of an Indian Rupee under the British rule.

Akbar–Birbal stories: The stories about the Moghul Emperor challenging Birbal – one of his court-gems – with tricky puzzles, and the legendary courtier's witty solutions.

18 The Rāmakrishna Mission, Haridwār

Dākor: The site of the Ranchhodraiji temple, about fifty-five miles south of Amdavad in Gujarat.

Sidhpur: One time capital of Gujarat, the site of Rudramalhālaya – a Lord Shiva temple.

Dwārakā: The city believed to be established by Lord Krishna, the home of the Dwārakādheesh temple.

Kaliyuga: Hindu scriptures break the timeline down into cycles of Satya, Treta, Dwāpar and Kali yugas in the descending order of morality.

19 Preparations

The Gangā Canal: An irrigation canal completed in 1854 by the East India Company.

Bhagirath task: Impossible task, referring to the King Bhagirath of mythology who brought Gangā from heaven to Earth.

20 The Holy Portal

Gokarna Mahābaleshwar: A prominent Lord Shiva shrine in the state of Karnataka.

21 The Departure

'Religion will protect its defenders': धर्मो रक्षति रक्षितः

23 The Sadhus' Home

Swāmi Rāma Tirtha (1873 – 1906): A teacher of the Hindu philosophy of Vedānta.

Swarg Āshram: Bābā Kāli Kamliwālā organisation's complex of ashrams, stores, etc.

Bor, ber: A popular berry-like fruit, Indian Jujube.

24 Something New Everyday

Manu: The progenitor of mankind in Hindu mythology, and author of Manusmriti, the metrical authority on Hindu law.

Dāl: Lentils

Roti: Flat rolled unleavened bread

Gud: Unrefined sugarcane; jaggery.

25 Devprayāg

Ghāt: Mountain pass.
Lotā: A small metal urn.
Vāmanāvatār: Lord Vishnu's 'dwarf' incarnation.

26 Cancelled My Srinagar Plan

Sādhanā: Intense spiritual pursuit of an objective.
Ādi Shankarāchārya: See Chapter 08 Glossary notes.

27 The Loving Touch

Peepal: Ficus religiosa, a large tree. Its heart-shaped leaves are used in Vishnu's worship rites.

'For the one that recognises unity...': तत्र को मोहः कः शोक एकत्वमनुपश्यतः (Ishopanishad).

Mārwādi: Native of Mārwār, a region of southwestern Rājasthān.

Dāsbodh: The book by Samartha Swāmi Rāmdās presenting the essence of many Vedic texts.

28 Tehri

Musical notes used: The original Vedic chants employed repetitive use of only three notes, although the *Sāma Veda* is believed to have used more than three.

Kalividamban: A humorous Sanskrit work on the ways for a half-wit to win over a whole assembly.

Fate: The answer to the Pundit's query. 'Unseen' fate is what awakens one from samādhi.

Panchmukhi Māruti: The five-headed version of god Hanumān.

Āshrams: The 25-year phases of a man's life according to the Hindu scriptures: Brahmacharyāshram, the student phase; Grihasthāshram, the family life phase; Vānprasthāshram, the retirement and contemplation phase; Sanyastāshram, the renunciation phase.

29 Bādaru's Village

'Having truth on our side…': 'When one is firmly established in speaking the truth, the fruits of action become subservient to him.' Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* 2:36.

Shabari and Vidur: Characters of meagre means from the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahabhārata* who played hosts to Lord Rāma and Lord Krishna respectively.

Paisā: 1/64th of a rupee, followed under the British rule and until India went decimal.

30 Over the Rāri Pass

'Land intersected by a narrow frith…': From 'The Task,' a poem by William Cowper (1731-1800)

Om or Aum: The all-encompassing mystical symbol in Hinduism.

'I recollect not, but surely sense…'

तत्चेतसा स्मरति नूनमबोधपूर्व
भावस्थिराणि जननान्तरसौहृदानि। *Abhijnānashākuntalam* (Act 5)

31 The Sage of Yamunā Bank

Mallakhamb pole: A seven-and-a-half foot tall pole of polished teak used for training and gymnastics.

Rājarām (1670–1700): The younger son of Chhatrapati Shivaji, and the third Chhatrapati of the Maratha empire. His short life was full of strife in the struggle against the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb.

Kāliya: The name of a Nāga (cobra) who lived in the Yamunā and terrorized Gokul and its surroundings. Krishna defeated and banished him from the area. (*Bhāgavat Purāna*)

33 Jamanotri

Jamanotri: Also Yamunotri, the source of the river Yamunā.

34 Over the Uprikot Mountain

Indraprastha, Hastināpur: In *Mahābhārata*, the capitals of the kingdoms of Pāndavas and Kauravas.

Shrāddha rite: Hindu rite intended to nourish, protect, and support the spirits of the dead ancestors.

35 Uttarkāshi

Shanimāhātmya: 'The importance of Shani.' Shani is the god of the planet Saturn in Hindu Astrology.

36 Gangotri

Bhagirath: The king in Hindu mythology credited with performing the 'impossible' task of bringing the sacred Gangā down from heaven to earth.

Ādi Shankarāchārya (788–820AD): A Hindu theologian and philosopher, he consolidated the doctrine of Adwaita – the unity of the Soul and the Whole. He brought organisation to the Hindu monastic orders, and the four Maths – monasteries – he founded continue to be the principal seats of organised Hinduism.

37 The Old Man Kedār

Setubandh Rāmeshwar: One of the holiest of Southern India shrines near the tip of the peninsula. Rāma is supposed to have built a bridge here to invade the demon Rāvana's Lankā to rescue Seetā – Rāma's wife.

Bhālu: Bear (in Hindi)

Amdāvādi: From Ahmedabad., Gujarat.

38 Bhot Chatti

Dāsbodh: The book by Samartha Swāmi Rāmdās presenting the essence of many Vedic texts.

39 Panwāli and Trijugi Nārāyan

Jayadratha: The villain in *Mahābhārata* whom Arjuna had vowed to kill before sunset. Krishna created an illusory sunset with clouds. When Jayadrath's protectors lowered their guard, Krishna lifted the clouds allowing Arjuna to finish his task.

Chāran: A community of folk bards.

Ātash Behrām: The fire brought to India from Persia by the Pārsees in the eighth century; It is still burning.

40 Kedārnāth

Shankarāchāryas: Head monks of the four monasteries set up by Ādi Shankarāchārya.

Shad-ripu: The six internal enemies, viz. lust, anger, greed, infatuation, arrogance and jealousy.

41 Ukhimath and Tungnāth

Bichhoo: Scorpion

42 The Badri Shrine

Veda Vyāsa: The author of the epic *Mahābhārata*, he also categorized the primordial single Veda into four parts, hence the name Veda Vyāsa – Splitter of the Vedas. He is a revered figure in many Hindu traditions.

Ādi Shankarāchārya (788–820AD): A Hindu theologian and philosopher, he consolidated the doctrine of Adwaita – the unity of the Soul and the Whole. He brought organisation to the Hindu monastic orders, and the four Maths – monasteries – he founded continue to be the principal seats of organised Hinduism.

Vaishnavites: Worshippers of Vishnu.

Shaivites: Worshippers of Shiva.

Samāji: Member of one of the reformist Hindu movements e.g. Ārya Samāj.

Sanātani: Member of what is loosely described as Orthodox Hinduism; as different from the reformers.

Patitapāvan: The purifier of the fallen.

Prasād: The sacramental offering made to an idol and then distributed among the faithful.

Shrāddha :Hindu rite intended to nourish, protect, and support the spirits of the dead ancestors.

Sant Tukārām (1608–1650): A prominent holy man and spiritual poet of the Bhakti movement era.

'Free was I once...':

आधीं होता मुक्त। स्वयें झाला बद्ध।

घेउनीयां छंद। माझें माझें॥

Lotā: A small metal urn.

Pandās: Local Brahmin priests that perform various religious rites.

Sheelā: Rock slab.

Mārwāri: Also Mārwādi, a native of the Mārwār region of the Indian State of Rajasthan.

Poojā: A worship ritual.

43 The Road Back

Shāligrām: An iconic representation of Vishnu, in the form of a spherical, usually black, stone found in the river Gandaki inNepal.

Janoi: The sacred thread generally worn by Brahmin males. The thin distinct strands of cotton thread run from left shoulder to waist. It is changed every year.

Ghee: Clarified butter.

Khichdi : Rice and moong bean splits cooked together.

Sant Tukārām (1608–1650): A prominent holy man and spiritual poet of the Bhakti movement era.

Abhang: A form of devotional Marāthi poetry sung in praise of the Hindu god Vithobā (Vishnu).

Swāmi Dayānand Saraswati (1824–1883) was a Hindu religious scholar, reformer and the founder of the Ārya Samāj, a Hindu reform movement initiated in 1875.

44 Dwārāhāt

Amarnāth Temple: A shrine in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. An ice stalagmite in a cave resembling a shivling – the phallus shaped Shiva icon – is said to grow and shrink with the phases of the moon.

45 The Benefits

Raurava Naraka: One of the twenty-eight different hells in Hindu mythology.

Sādhanā: Intense spiritual pursuit of an objective.

Satpurush: A god-realised man of virtue.

Col. Younghusband: Francis Younghusband, a British Army officer, led the 1904 expedition to Tibet that controversially became (by exceeding instructions from London) a de facto invasion of Tibet and resulted in 7,000 Tibetan deaths.

Sister Niveditā (1867–1911): Born Margaret Elizabeth Noble, was an Anglo-Irish social worker, author, teacher and disciple of Swāmi Vivekānanda. She set up a school for girls deprived of even basic education and worked to improve the lives of Indian women.

The Vitality of Life

'Providence walks with the one that walks': चराति चरतो भगः (The Rigveda)

The Rigveda: (ऋग्वेद) The oldest of the four Vedas, the canonical sacred texts of Hinduism.

Tugra and Bhujyu: Son and father, naval-warriors mentioned repeatedly in Rigveda.

Jātaka Tales: A voluminous body of folklore-like literature concerning the previous births of the Buddha.

Periplus Maris Erythraei, the first-century Greek book on travel and trade in the Indian Ocean. Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus (62–113 AD), known as Pliny the Younger, was a Roman statesman and historian but his authorship of Periplus is seriously doubted.

Karamadā: Carissa Carandas, a small berry-sized tart fruit.

Dattatreya Balkrishna 'Kaka' Kalelkar (1885-1981) was a Gandhian nationalist, a scholar, a social reformer and an educationalist. Born a Marathi, he soared to such heights as a writer in Gujarati that Gujarat took pride in calling him 'Savai Gujarati' – a better Gujarati than the native Gujaratis. He was among the founder members of the Gujarat Vidyapith and later became its vice chancellor. Sahitya Akademi honored Kakasaheb's extraordinary literary achievements by making him a Fellow in 1971.

Ashok Meghani, an engineer by profession, took early retirement and has been devoting his leisure time to literary activity. He has translated three other Gujarati books into English with *The Himālaya : A Cultural Pilgrimage* being his first foray into the non-fiction world.

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